

A photograph of two young children, likely of African descent, smiling broadly. They are positioned in the foreground, with their heads and shoulders visible. The child on the left is wearing a blue t-shirt with a colorful graphic, and the child on the right is wearing a light blue polo shirt. The background is a bright blue wall with some texture. A semi-transparent white box is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing the title and subtitle.

Thought Leaders on Early Childhood Development in South Africa

A Collection of Thought-Provoking Essays

**Editors: Eric Atmore,
Michaela Ashley-Cooper,
and Lauren van Niekerk**



SUGGESTED CITATION

Atmore, E., Ashley-Cooper, M., & van Niekerk, L. 2021. Thought Leaders on Early Childhood Development in South Africa: A Collection of Thought-Provoking Essays. Cape Town: Centre for Early Childhood Development.

ISBN: 978-0-620-91470-3

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Editors:

Eric Atmore, Michaela Ashley-Cooper, and Lauren van Niekerk

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many researchers, early childhood development non-profit organisation directors and programme managers, ECD specialists and experts, principals and teachers who contributed essays to this book. Your contribution to this book and the ECD sector in South Africa is hugely appreciated.

We would also like to acknowledge the hundreds of thousands of people (mostly women) who dedicate their lives to caring for and educating the young children of South Africa, a job which is sorely undervalued by many and is consistently under-compensated, but a calling which our society relies on heavily. Without you, our children would be without a safe place to learn and grow, caregivers would not be able to go out and contribute to the economy, and our country would fall further into poverty and inequality. Your work is important, invaluable and we salute you.

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Introduction

As we proceed through the global COVID-19 pandemic, our country has been profoundly impacted on. The early childhood development (ECD) sector has been particularly impacted on and is now under severe threat. Despite the promises and commitments made by government post-1994, ECD has not flourished as we had hoped. This is particularly evident in ECD provision rates and in the absence of government's political will and National Treasury's financial allocations to the ECD sector. Certainly, more children are attending ECD centres and programmes since 1994 but it is civil society that has made this happen. Whilst doing this, the ECD non-profit sector gets little acknowledgement of its work from government. It is clear that, politically, there is a lack of support, some would even say resistance, from government towards ECD.

The ideal of "Putting Young Children First", proudly an aim in our early years of democracy, has not been realised. Many respected commentators and thought leaders are now suggesting that vulnerable young children are worse off today, in 2021.

This edited collection of essays covers the thoughts, concerns, calls-for-action, and opinions of thought leaders in the ECD sector in South Africa. It consists of 16 essays, of varying length, on various aspects of ECD. I approached these authors as highly respected thought leaders in ECD, asking them to contribute an essay

for the book on any ECD aspect of their choice, which they find to be relevant for this time in history. Each person approached, immediately agreed to contribute to this collection. My brief to authors was that “nothing is sacred, please take the opportunity to be provocative, challenging and adventurous.” I also asked some authors to contribute specific articles which I had come across and wanted to share with a wider audience. The idea is that you can dip into this collection and take something of value out each time.

This final collection examines and discusses ECD from various viewpoints. The contributors include experienced ECD activists, young emerging ECD leaders, academics, researchers, non-profit leaders, ECD centre principals and teachers, and ECD programme implementors. Importantly, authors have written from their heads and their hearts. We hope they stimulate thinking and enlighten readers.

This volume explores a number of crucial areas, including: the effects of COVID-19 on the ECD sector; the significant inequality present in the ECD field in South Africa; the power of play in learning; the importance of improving the intergenerational transmission of value systems; the role and importance of ECD forums in South Africa; the importance of perseverance in spite of the obstacles faced in offering quality ECD programmes in the country; the challenges and importance of registering and funding home-based ECD programmes; the importance of multiple communication streams to boost early learning and literacy; the importance of supporting ECD principals and teachers amidst their challenges; how to holistically develop children to become economically active and productive as adults; how men can and should become more involved in the professional ECD sector; and lastly, government’s ECD policies and solutions to improve implementation.

Amongst the diverse opinions expressed here, a few common threads are present, and a number of points are clear:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the fault lines in the ECD sector in South Africa, and also has exacerbated them.
- There remain far too many young children outside the current system of provision, particularly those in remote areas and poor communities.
- The children who are most in need of an ECD programme are the ones who are least likely to access the services required.

- We need to rethink how we approach ECD, viewing ECD in a multi-sectoral way, involving all relevant stakeholders in a meaningful way.
- There is no political will to support ECD and this directly affects the lives of young children.
- Despite all of this, ECD NPOs, ECD principals and teachers have ploughed on with a relentless will and singular purpose to work in the best interests of children.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development has published this volume which it is distributing at no cost to the broad ECD community in South Africa and also globally. We have also made it available as an e-book.

I thank my two outstanding young co-editors, Michaela Ashley-Cooper and Lauren van Niekerk, for co-editing this collection of essays. Whilst the concept is mine and I approached the authors, Michaela and Lauren did extensive editing and liaison with the writers. They are a pleasure to work with, competent, and always pleasant. Each has a bright future ahead. I would also like to thank Michele Edgecomb, who designed the layout for this book. Michele is our 'go-to' graphic designer, and is excellent. She can be reached on indgo@iafrica.com.

This book has been produced at a time when South Africa is at a crossroads. Either we put young children first or we lose all pretence of caring for young children. This work starts from the fundamental premise of the late Oliver Tambo who expressed that if we are to deserve our future, we must value our youngest citizens.



Eric Atmore
Cape Town
01 February 2021

1 A Great Chance to Accelerate Early Learning Development for Children in South Africa

Zanele Twala

The state's future plans as contained in the National Development Plan 2030, if implemented as proposed, will give South Africa's children the best chance for early learning development. The National Development Plan (NDP) proposes that dedicated resources should be channelled towards ensuring that all children are well cared for from an early age and receive appropriate emotional, cognitive and physical development stimulation. It further proposes an implementation of a nutrition programme for pregnant women and young children to be followed by a childhood development care programme for all children under the age of 3 years. If successful, this intervention alone will provide an opportunity for South Africa to deal with many of the early learning development problems that are experienced by children as a result of not receiving proper nutrition at conception.

At a Colloquium on Stunting convened by DG Murray Trust (DGMT) in Durban in 2016, David Harrison, CEO of DGMT, reminded us of the evidence generated by neuro-science research, which states that *"Our genetic material which make us who we are can set us on a particular path i.e. we start at an advantage or disadvantage. Research shows that during early foetal growth, most of the effort of development is directed to the brain. By nine months old, the brain as an organism is already fully formed. Different parts of the brain are responsible for different functions or activities like, planning, imagination, hearing, memory, movement, visual, hearing and sight."* (Harrison, 2016)

Given this critical time in foetal growth for early learning development, the proposed interventions in the NDP are vital. They challenge South African society to view early childhood development in a multi-sectoral way. No longer can ECD be viewed as a project of government health, education or social development alone but rather should be seen as an initiative of society at large, state and non-state actors including parents, who are the primary caregivers of the children.

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Since the launch of the NDP 2030 in August 2013, government released the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) 2014 - 2019. This was government's strategic plan which set out the actions government was to take and targets to be achieved. It also provided a framework for the other plans of national, provincial and local government. At the core of this strategic plan were the actions and targets for improving the provision of early childhood development. The plans set out that all children should enjoy services and benefits aimed at facilitating access to nutrition, health care, education, social care and safety (access and quality).

The Department of Social Development (DSD), which was the lead department, working with the Departments of Basic Education (DBE) and Health (DoH) developed an integrated programme of action that set the path of getting government to work in an integrated way in providing ECD services.

Tamar Manuelyan Atinc and Emily Gustafsson-Wright (2013), in their article entitled *Early Childhood Development: the Promise, the Problem and the Path Forward*, reflected on the complexity of providing comprehensive ECD programmes that reach all children. They stated that ECD programmes comprise a range of interventions that aim for a healthy pregnancy; proper nutrition with exclusive breast feeding through six months of age (where possible) and adequate micronutrient content in diet; regular growth monitoring and immunisation;

frequent and structured interactions with a caring adult; and improving the parenting skills of caregivers. In their reflection they said that no country in the developing world can boast of such comprehensive programmes and that many of them fall short.

If South Africa has to succeed in implementing comprehensive and holistic ECD programmes effectively, we need to come up with a carefully thought out implementation plan of the best delivery mode – centre-, family- or community-based; identify the delivery agents – community health workers, mothers selected by the communities, teachers and so forth; the frequency and duration of interventions; training and supervision of the delivery agents; the relative value of nutritional versus stimulative interventions; and the benefits from the delivery of an integrated package of services versus specific services that are co-ordinated at the point of delivery; as well as the most effective curricula and material to be used (Manuelyan Atinc and Gustafsson-Wright, 2013).

Furthermore Gail Washkansky (2014) in her article *State robs children of best chance* reflected that “*there is no well-directed political will. The delay of the government departments responsible for ECD in acknowledging the short comings of the current system and their failure to take action is committing yet another cohort of young people to a life of frustrated attempts at learning.*”

The National Planning Commission, in their published diagnostic report, acknowledged all the problems related to the current early childhood development provision in South Africa. The National Development Plan and the MTSF (2014 - 2019) clearly signified government’s commitment to early childhood development. If this was not a signal of well-directed political will, then I do not know what well-directed political will is.

“ South Africa still finds itself at a crossroads when it comes to the delivery of ECD services to poor and vulnerable children who need it the most. Worse still, the country is confronted by the COVID-19 pandemic which has shone a light on long-standing fault-lines in the early childhood development sector.

Eight years later, since the launch of the NDP in 2013, and the above reflections which were published by various experts in early childhood development, South Africa still finds itself at a crossroads when it comes to the delivery of ECD services to poor and vulnerable children who need it the most. Worse still, the country is confronted by the COVID-19 pandemic which has shone a light on long-standing fault-lines in the early childhood development sector.

Too many young children and families remain outside of a system of provision at a critical developmental moment in their lives, particularly in under-served and poor communities. Many role-players argue that the failure to provide for young children from conception to 6 years old is the result of weak leadership, insufficient funding, and a poorly organised sector. While the pandemic significantly impacts on socio-economic factors, which undermine children's early development, it is also an opportunity to take stock of a largely 'immobilised' ECD sector, and 'build back better'. Strategies to mitigate the negative consequences of the pandemic for young children and their families in the short term can, and should, contribute to increased socio-economic resilience for individuals and the ECD sector in the long-term.

So where are the opportunities to take stock of a largely immobilised ECD sector and build back?

As stated above, government is responsible for the development of a publicly funded ECD system in South Africa supported by civil society and the private sector. The National Development Plan identified early childhood development as a priority. It proposed that every child attend two years of pre-schooling before entering Grade 1. Currently, the DBE carries responsibility for Grade R provision, while DSD is responsible for services for younger children. With a function shift set from DSD to DBE, this will change over the next ten years. DBE will take over the reins by 2030.

In an effort to support government in this function shift for ECD from DSD to DBE over the years ahead, there is opportunity to focus on building those parts of the sector that are enabling of learning and development outcomes with a view to increasing education efficiencies and long-term school success. The opportunities

to take stock and build better lie nowhere else but in the wisdom and actions of the ECD sector itself, working collaboratively with government. There are many opportunities to build back, however in this write up, I will only focus on the two most critical ones that were identified in the development of a problem statement for the ECD sector for the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) to consider in their role of supporting government.

The first opportunity would be to undertake a landscaping and analysis of current sector activities, role players, and achievements to support the ECD sector and build back interventions.

The ECD sector in South Africa is characteristically fragmented. Its fragility and struggle to survive impacts significantly on sector 'politics' and underpins an often-challenging relationship between civil society organisations and the relevant government agencies. Clear communication and a collective vision could assist in reducing conflict and increase collaboration between stakeholders to the advantage of the sector as a whole.

A landscaping analysis of actions currently underway by numerous stakeholders, that do and don't intersect with each other, could provide a tool for the facilitation of sector-wide understanding of current challenges and opportunities to widen collaboration and collective action (whole-of-society/whole-of-government).

The second opportunity would be to capitalise on the actions of the ECD sector where civil society organisations, in the current COVID-19 pandemic environment, have adapted their existing resources and platforms in response to the closure of ECD centres by supporting parents and providing home-based learning solutions. By expanding and continuing these interventions, even when ECD centres reopen, the government can ensure that unreached populations of children continue to benefit through opportunities to learn and develop where they are. Government should consider supporting a package to accelerate early learning and readiness for Grade 1 that can be implemented by Grade R teachers and supported by playful learning at home.

Well-designed 'accelerated learning programmes' have been shown to be successful

at reintegrating children even in under-resourced post-conflict contexts. Such programmes require focusing on the most important elements of the missed curriculum. In most countries this has been delivered by community-based volunteers who have received short induction and on-the-job support (Jeffery & Karki, 2020).

In my opinion, this could be the beginning of forging better relations and collaboration between ECD state and non-state actors for the benefit of many young children and families who remain outside of a system of provision at a critical developmental moment in their lives, particularly in under-served and poor communities.

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2

Diminished, but not Defeated

Rene King

The greatest challenge facing the ECD sector in South Africa over the past 30 years has been to fully realise a vision of that which is now captured in the National Integrated ECD Policy 2015. The non-profit sector has worked tirelessly, under extremely difficult circumstances, towards the refinement of strategies that mobilise a broad spectrum of community, civil and state structures which could serve as models of how access to qualitative ECD programmes and services can be provided to all young children in a given locality.

In the relentless and unforgiveable abdication of the state and a reluctance to take responsibility for our youngest citizens, many erstwhile organisations and champions for children ploughed on with an implacable will and purpose to work in the interests of children. Many of us were able to trial and test a long-held hypothesis that authentic community-based interventions were more likely to be sustainable if they were a response to articulated local needs. And it was in this way, in the absence of state support, and by

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raising a collective consciousness of the critical importance of early childhood development, that programmes in support of nurturing care, protection, health, nutrition and early stimulation emerged across the country through the creation of localised support systems for our most vulnerable children.

While some have come and gone, and others have emerged dramatically in recent years, desperate to address the issue of scale, approximately 100 ECD Non-Profit Resource and Training Organisations in South Africa have pioneered a rich variety of contextually appropriate ECD programmes and resources over the last 40 years. These ECD NPOs have been the major provider of training for ECD teachers and practitioners, developed teaching and learning materials, provided on-site support and quality assurance for ECD centres, and refined a range of ECD service modalities to create access to quality ECD learning for children.

In these ECD NPOs resides the intellectual capital, ECD expertise, skills and experience so desperately needed to provide and scale-up qualitative ECD programmes, but they have always been under-resourced and now, in the wake of COVID-19, are teetering on the brink of collapse. We stand aghast at a tragically decimated sector with an appallingly high percentage of ECD sites that have not reopened, given the prohibitive compliance requirements and loss of income, and whom are unlikely to ever recover.

How do we begin to count the cost of the lack of assertive and definitive action by government to intervene during the period of the country-wide lockdown? How do we begin to explain the negation of the efforts of a long serving sector with little or no support from the public sector, abrupt cessation of professional development and skills training programmes for practitioners working with young children, the loss of key ECD human resource capacity, and the withdrawal of resources, training and support to the most vulnerable families and their young children in the poorest communities in South Africa?

There are those that claim that the current crisis has once again revealed the divisions within the ECD sector in South Africa. I hold no such position. I believe that the sector has pulled together valiantly, be it in different formations, representations, working groups or forums, each in their own right fighting robustly for urgent

attention to be given to the need for immediate and imperative economic relief for ECD practitioners. Robust efforts have been made, be it in the form of petitions, protests, surveys, legal action, an ongoing aggressive advocacy and media campaign to raise public awareness of the plight of our ECD workforce and bring pressure to bear on government – all these initiatives are worthy of acknowledgement and respect. Despite the outcome, I applaud those who gave so willingly of their time and energy to support the Department of Social Development in their belated response to designing protocols and procedures for the re-opening of ECD sites and the subsequent development of a proposal to Treasury for an economic stimulus package for the ECD sector. Never before has there been such a generosity of spirit by organisations to develop, design and share resources and materials to support parents in the care of young children in the home.

Past and present studies have highlighted the limitations on the capacity of ECD Resource and Training Organisations to expand their programmes and services as they have always been, and now more so than ever before, severely constrained by the financial resources available to them. While there are some organisations who have emerged stronger than they were, with access to significant resources, there are too many others who will not be able to reposition themselves. There are those that predict that we will see a more dramatic shift from centre-based to non-centre-based provision and rightfully so, a focus on supporting parents has become more prevalent.

And so going forward, let us not be daunted by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ECD sector, or overwhelmed by the task of rescuing, rebuilding or re-establishing programmes and services for young children. Let us take stock of what remains and in an implacable call to immediate action find ways in which to recalibrate and realign strategies and interventions, mobilising what resources we can and harnessing collective commitment to the fundamental rights of children.

In the end, best said in the words of Author, Robert Fulghum, “Don’t worry that children never listen to you, worry that they are always watching you.”

3

Things We Must Stop Saying and Doing in ECD

Eric Atmore

In the early childhood development (ECD) sector, many things are said and done without adequate prior thought. We still hear these things being said and see things being done which, in my view, are not correct or appropriate. In some instances, these are stated and done with passion, belief and authority. Despite this passion, belief and authority, these statements and activities need a thorough examining. There are twelve aspects that I want to write about and challenge. In no particular order, these are:

1. The children are our future

There is a common saying that “The children are the future/our future”. This is not entirely correct. The children are here, today; they require quality education, good nutrition, housing, social protection and health care today; not at some time in the future. The famous Chilean poet, Gabriel Mistral, wrote that the child cannot wait, his name is today. So, whilst the children of today will live in the time of tomorrow, we must respect and meet the fundamental human rights of the child today and tomorrow.

2. We must work with government

There is now a strongly-held view that “we must work with government”. Yes, this is

a best-case scenario, but what do you do if a government does not respect the rights of the child, if a government ignores the child, if a government is uncaring, if parts of government, politicians and officials, are corrupt? Do we ignore these and turn a blind eye? We must work with government, yes, but just as important; we must speak truth to power. Where government neglects children, we must not be afraid to speak out. However, in recent times, ECD NPOs and individuals are fearful of speaking out for fear of losing funding opportunities. In recent times ECD NPOs have been silent in challenging government where it is failing children.

3. The mushrooming of ECD centres must stop

In a country where there is severe under-provision of ECD centres and programmes, why do some call for a halt to the “mushrooming of ECD centres”. Surely, we need greater provision and access. Unfortunately, this type of thinking has been repeated by government officials, too lazy or incapable to support ECD centres and programmes. We need more, not fewer ECD centres and programmes. By the way, our Constitution guarantees everyone the right to start an enterprise, including an ECD centre.

4. Allowing government to get away with poor ECD policy implementation

I have heard many times that “South Africa’s ECD policy is good but implementation is poor”. This comes from international child-focussed organisations, from donors, from ECD NPOs and from academics. Yet, as a sector we allow government to get away with poor or little implementation of what is an excellent ECD policy. While the National Integrated ECD policy approved by Cabinet on 9th December 2015 is excellent, the lack of political will, national and provincial official’s capacity to implement and the minimal funding to implement the policy, fails our children.

5. The ECD sector is fragmented

The ECD sector is not fragmented, it is however diverse. There are about 90 ECD NPOs and another 40 NPOs that have ECD as part of their wider activities. There is large scale agreement on ECD in South Africa amongst these NPOs. Yes, of course

more partnerships would always be beneficial, and of course there are differences, there will always be. This is the vibrancy of the ECD sector in South Africa. But some government departments and officials have used “fragmentation” as a means to play political games, to hold power and not to fund the ECD sector. Some donors have also fallen into this mind-set. Strangely, no one says that there are too many shebeens. Imagine that every ECD NPO was the same, there would be no growth or development.

Linked to this is the often-heard comment that “The ECD sector must speak with one voice” Why? In a democracy there are many views and opinions. If we are spoke with one voice where would the innovation, creativity, growth and variation come from? And what if that one voice is incorrect? Remember that at one time there was one voice (narrative) that thought that the world is flat. I would rather work in an ECD sector where there is a multiplicity of views and opinions that inform each other, with one overall vision.

6. Calling ECD teachers, “practitioners”

Why do we call an adult who works with young children a “practitioner”? What is a practitioner? The work that ECD adults in the playroom do is teaching and caring for children. Yes, these adults may not be qualified in the sense of having a four-year professional qualification, such as a BEd degree, but they are trained and they are doing vital work in education. Why should we not be calling them ‘teachers’?

7. Calling some ECD programmes “alternative”

Why are some ECD programmes termed “alternative”. The word “alternative” has certain understandings, connotations and most often an implication of being second best, as an alternative to something else that is better and preferred. It has become common to refer to parent education, playgroups, family outreach and such programmes as alternative programmes. They are not. They are part of a continuum of services. So, let us stop talking about alternative programmes, with the second-rate connotation.

8. One curriculum is better than others

Curriculum is an emotional issue. I have heard people say that their curriculum (of whatever origin) is “better than others” or “the best”. Since almost every curriculum derives from the same child development theory, is it so important that we proclaim one curriculum to be “better” than another? Whether it is Montessori, High Scope, Rudolf Steiner or traditional, so long as the learning programme embraces quality early learning activities, good health care and nutrition, and nurturing care, we must desist from branding one curriculum as better than others. They all have strengths and none should be dismissed or regarded as less good. This is arrogant.

9. Donor-driven ECD

Recently something worrying has emerged in the ECD sector, this is donor-driven ECD provision. Some donors are now both donor and programme provider and ECD NPOs have fallen into this trap in their search for funding. Donors have an important role to play in ECD thinking, provision and programming, a very important one, but *implementing* ECD programmes should not be one of these.

10. The first 1,000 days

The first 1,000 days is not something that we must stop emphasising. The first 1,000 days has always been critically important in child development. The global child rights community has, until recent years, neglected this. It is now being focussed on, which is correct. My fear is that this emphasis may end up being to the detriment of child development post the first 1,000 days. My fear is that resources will move from programmes for children aged two years and older, solely towards programmes targeted at the first 1,000 days. We need to grow the cake (funding of programmes) rather than neglecting programmes for children older than two years. Let us focus on the first 1,000 days and the next 1,000 days and the next 1,000 days.

11. Believing statistics about ECD in South Africa

Statistics on ECD in South Africa is notoriously weak. Various authors have commented on this and inserted disclaimers on data quoted in their articles. There

is no single data depository on ECD in South Africa. The last validated, complete ECD audit was done in the year 2000 and published one year later in May 2001. The only really accurate ECD data currently available is the annual Department of Basic Education School Realities report that publishes data on Grade R enrolment. What seems to be the practice is that statistics are quoted that use flawed sources. We must all be careful of the statistics that we quote and base our assumptions and decisions on.

12. Being scared to litigate

It is clear that ECD organisations in South African are scared to litigate. Whilst government ignores its very own Constitution, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and its own national ECD policies, ECD national organisations/bodies and ECD NPOs will not litigate and go to court to force government to ensure the rights of young children. Equal Education has been very successful in this as has the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in earlier years. Recently, a few ECD organisations (an emerging ECD association, one ECD NPO, one Children's organisation, some ECD Forums, an ECD centre and a priest) took government to court and won both cases, but conspicuous by its absence was the ECD NPO sector, except for the one organisation mentioned above. The fear of litigation is related to the following: If we as an ECD NPO litigate, then government will not fund us. This is not correct, government funds very few ECD NPOs anyway.

Summary

While much has been done in ECD by communities, activists and ECD NPOs across South Africa of late, we must be careful of what is said and done, especially what is clearly not correct. We must choose our words and actions carefully and question our understanding and beliefs on ECD. Most importantly, we must not be afraid to speak up on what we believe in, provided we can back it up with a solid argument and facts. For far too long has the ECD sector lost its voice and activism, we must reclaim it.

4

Count on Our Tiny, but Important, Voices too!

Riedewhaan Allie

Despite local and international research on the importance of early childhood development for years, it took the COVID-19 pandemic a few months to highlight the negative impact of the lockdown on young children, and to sound a wakeup call to government and the Department of Social Development in particular. In 2007, an expert panel of economists ranked early childhood development (ECD) as the first of 40 potential solutions to development problems in Latin America (Budlender, 2015). It is for this reason that the ECD sector in South Africa use the economic argument supported by the World Bank and leading economists to bolster the call for more direct investment in ECD.

Research shows that investment in early childhood has a future return of between 7-18%, and that young children exposed to quality ECD programmes are more likely to complete schooling and become gainfully employed in their adult years (Grunewald and Rolnick, 2010:12).

If the South African government were to match ECD spending to higher education, the future savings on social security, remedial and rehabilitation services could be significant as argued by Heckman and Rubinstein (2003).

Using a “rights-based framework”, child advocates and ECD NGOs argue that ECD is a right and not merely a means to achieve other developmental goals. ECD, as

an apex priority at all levels of government, has been highlighted in recent policy developments.

Since the World Summit for Children of 1990, which endorsed the widespread ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the follow-up conference held in Dakar in 2000, all member-states committed to expanding early childhood care and education for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states: *“For the purposes of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present convention, state parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.”*

Research on ECD over the last two decades confirms its importance, and the potential social policy benefits to societies who adequately invest in children’s early development. Research also shows that the skills developed in early childhood form the basis for future learning and labour market success (Heckman and Masterov, 2007).

ECD experience and participation enhances a child’s ability to learn, work with others and develop social skills that are the foundation for formal learning and social interaction in the school years and beyond. Failure to develop these foundational skills can lead to long-term, often irreversible effects on educational attainment, health and productive earnings, which later result in significant costs for both individuals and society (Heckman and Masterov 2007).

We, however, know that preschool provision is skewed and the bulk of children under the age of 6 still cannot access preschool services because of poverty and many are still struggling to access Grade R to prepare for the challenges of the school system. This begs the question: “How do we expect to turn educational outcomes around for our children?”

Optimal brain development in the first two to three years of children’s lives can be compromised when poor socio-economic and environmental conditions prevail.

Communities on the Cape Flats and the growing informal settlements across the Western Cape and South Africa, are living in appalling conditions. These areas are also known for high levels of crime and violence which are all conditions that can lead to a build-up of toxicity in young children; toxicity which affects their coping and healthy brain development (Naudeau et al., 2011). This is further compounded by the growing poverty, food insecurity, and the high levels of alcohol and substance abuse, which leads to stunting and underdevelopment in children.

Patricia Martin and Dr Wiedaad Slemming in their article, 'Health System: Best ECD Boost' (Weekend Argus, September 16, 2017), correctly argue that the health system needs to be overhauled, with a stronger emphasis on ECD services already during pregnancy and the first two years of life to ensure holistic early intervention so that language, hearing, vision and oral health can be identified, assessed and addressed before children enter the formal school system.

The current preschool model and subsidy system are also in need of review. ECD services in townships compared to the leafy suburbs remain a reflection of the disparity between the “haves” and “have-nots” where a minority of children have access to excellent preschool programmes, while most of the children in townships have to make do with inexperienced and unqualified teachers in overcrowded conditions.

The growing demand for ECD services requires parents and communities to insist that their children's preschools become registered and better resourced, which could lead to improved services that will hopefully give all our young children the head-start they require. Once again, using the “rights” argument, all children should have the right to access ECD services and programmes in their communities and as close to their homes as possible. Children cannot be denied their right to access ECD services because

“ Children should have the right to access ECD services and programmes in their communities and as close to their homes as possible. Children cannot be denied their right to access ECD services because policy and legislative prescripts are too onerous for service providers to become compliant.

policy and legislative prescripts are too onerous for service providers to become compliant. Given the registration challenges of preschool service providers in poor communities, we have to explore with alternative programmes in order for much more children to benefit from government subsidies and funding.

Through collaborative engagements, ECD NGOs have to start scaling up and rolling out various ECD strategies, such as home visiting and parenting programmes, playgroups, reading circles, educational toy libraries and mobile programmes that are being implemented so that more children can benefit and be prepared for the challenges of the formal school system.

As duty bearers we are duty-bound to stand at the polling station every five years to demand better services for our youngest citizens.

On behalf of the voiceless children, we say: “#CountOurTinyVoicesToo!” At the next election parents in poor communities will know where to make their mark when our politicians take our children’s needs seriously.

The ECD and care needs of young children and women are two sides of one coin. Therefore, we have to explore how our collaborative strategies also look at the increasing levels of violence and crime against women and children at a time when child murders and rapes leave us all shocked at the moral degradation that creeps in.

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5

Free Quality ECD for All Young Children

Joan Daries

The Community Chest regards the provision of free early childhood development (ECD) programmes (i.e., ECD programmes for children 0-5 years old) to poor families as fundamental to the development and protection of vulnerable children and to bringing an end to some of the violence against women and children.

ECD programming forms a vital part of the development of every child. We know that children who have access to quality ECD programmes from an early age are better suited to coping with formal schooling and life in general.

International research reveals that children represent the most vulnerable groups globally, particularly in low and middle-income emerging countries, where poverty and inequality prevail.

Children in disadvantaged communities are deprived of fundamental basic socio-economic rights, including access to basic nutrition, health care, shelter, education and social services. Without access to quality ECD which includes loving, nurturing care, good nutrition and appropriate cognitive and physical stimulation, too many young children are left permanently stunted, intellectually and emotionally, thus feeding the vicious cycle of inter-generational poverty.

The Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University stated in its publication:

The Impact of Early Adversity on Children's Development, that “what happens in early childhood can matter for a lifetime. To successfully manage our society's future, we must recognise problems and address them before they get worse. In early childhood, research on the biology of stress shows how major adversity, such as extreme poverty, abuse, or neglect, can weaken developing brain architecture and permanently set the body's stress response system on high alert. Science also shows that providing stable, responsive, nurturing relationships in the earliest years of life can prevent or even reverse the damaging effects of early life stress, with lifelong benefits for learning, behaviour, and health” (2015, page 1).

“ What happens in early childhood can matter for a lifetime. To successfully manage our society's future, we must recognise problems and address them before they get worse.

The study further states that from “the prenatal period through the first years of life, the brain undergoes its most rapid development and early experiences determine whether its architecture is sturdy or fragile” (2015, page 2).

It must therefore stand, as a crucial priority for the South African government and its academic, health and education partners, that by ensuring the maximum development of the child in the first five years of his or her life, we are in fact making a huge investment in the well-being of both the child and the country.

The study also states that “during early sensitive periods of development, the brain's circuitry is most open to the influence of external experiences, for better or for worse. During these sensitive periods, healthy emotional and cognitive development is shaped by responsive, dependable interaction with adults, while chronic or extreme adversity can interrupt normal brain development.”

It is clear that early and healthy stimulation of the brain forever shapes the emotional and cognitive abilities of the child.

One of the many challenges faced by South African children is an unacceptable

level of personal and community adversity. This includes high levels of family and community violence, the trauma of untimely deaths of close family members, absence of a parent, and lack of food and general nutrition.

The lack of access to ECD opportunities, formal education and the lack of resources to participate in education add to the adversity facing children. The environmental degradation visible in many communities where children are trapped, brings with it further unbearable stresses. Those who are entrusted to care for children are often unable and unskilled to manage the challenging behaviours that children who are not coping may display.

For any child, acquiring the resilience to cope with adversity is an important part of healthy child development. The Harvard report states that when children are threatened, their bodies activate a variety of “physiological responses, including increases in heart rate, blood pressure and stress hormones such as cortisol”.

When a young child is protected by supportive relationships with adults, he/she learns to cope with everyday challenges. Scientists call this positive stress. Tolerable stress occurs when more serious difficulties, such as the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a frightening injury, are buffered by caring adults who help the child adapt, which mitigates the potentially damaging effects of abnormal levels of stress hormones. When strong, frequent, or prolonged adverse experiences such as extreme poverty or repeated abuse are experienced without adult support, stress becomes toxic, as excessive cortisol disrupts developing brain circuits.”

Research has shown that such prolonged toxic stress can slow or even stop both brain development and physical growth. Prolonged exposure to cortisol can cause long-term damage to the developing brain and can negatively affect the immune system.

Many researchers state that in the context of South Africa’s extremely violent past and present, because South Africans witness and are victims and perpetrators of violence more often than in other countries, it can be concluded that the overwhelming majority of South Africa’s children live in conditions where physiological damage is done to their brains every day (SaferSpaces, n.d.). Creating

safe places, protective educational spaces and healthy play spaces all help to reduce the production of cortisol and thus protect brain development and physical growth. In addition to the developmental benefits ECD programming provides for children, it also forms a crucial part of the safety infrastructure of vulnerable communities. Many communities are exposed to high levels of crime and violence, with child murders and violence against women showing alarming increases.

Most parents affected by poverty do not have the capacity to provide quality ECD for their children, thus the child grows up without the necessary brain stimulation and with broad exposure to toxic stress – including poverty, neglect, parental substance abuse and mental illness, and exposure to violence. These have a cumulative effect on an individual's physical and mental health. The more adverse experiences in childhood, the greater the likelihood of developmental delays and the presence of other negative social and behavioural problems.

Research shows that “adults with more adverse experiences in early childhood are also more likely to have health problems, including alcoholism, depression, heart disease and diabetes”. Furthermore “numerous scientific studies support these conclusions: providing supportive, responsive relationships as early in life as possible can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress” (Administration for Care and Families, n.d.).

In poor and vulnerable communities, free ECD opportunities become an imperative resource to families.

Using the StatsSA Food Poverty Line (FPL) 2019 as a base, 25.2% of South Africans live in extreme poverty (as published in BusinessTech, 01 August 2020). That's 15 million people, who earn below R561 per month, who are unable to pay for daily basic nutritional requirements.

Assessments must be made to find parents who cannot afford to pay for ECD programmes and we must ensure their children have access to these programmes. If South Africa is to become a prosperous nation, with far fewer failure rates within the school system and with decreasing crime and violence trends, we need to ensure that the foundation of ECD is a right for every child in this country.

We must design a new ECD subsidy system that funds the vulnerable and poor child and not the child of a parent who can afford to pay for an ECD service.

“ We must design a new ECD subsidy system that funds the vulnerable and poor child and not the child of a parent who can afford to pay for an ECD service.

As part of the analysis around the Western Cape’s spate of child murders, we must research to what extent violence relates to the impact of poor nurturing and developmental deficits in both victims and perpetrators.

On examination, we can see a correlation between current crime rates, violence against women and children, and the lack of access to quality ECDs for children.

Could we change this negative pattern of behaviour over the long term by providing free ECD programmes as a crucial input into the well-being of the lives of women and children?

Community Chest calls on partners and organisations working with children to begin the dialogue on how free ECD programmes can be provided to children, to protect and develop them.

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6

The Inequality of Access to Early Childhood Development Programmes in South Africa

Michaela Ashley-Cooper

The majority of young children in South Africa are impacted daily by significant social and economic inequalities. With the history of Apartheid in the country, alongside the subsequent socio-economic inequalities, most South African children have been deprived of their fundamental socio-economic rights, including access to healthcare, social services, nutrition, and education. The inequality of access to services for young children, in particular, early childhood development programmes, is so pervasive, and has been for so long, that it has become almost invisible; a silent tragedy.

Both international and local research explicitly show that access to quality early childhood development (ECD) programmes play a crucial role in reducing inequality (Engle et al. 2011). This is achieved by protecting children against the effects of poverty, poor nutrition, insufficient health services and a lack of stimulation and education. Following extensive research into its effects, internationally ECD is now viewed as one of the most cost-efficient investments a society can make in developing human capital; leading to the sustainable development of the entire country (Shonkoff et al. 2016).

Inequality in early childhood opportunities

Roughly 36% of the 19.7 million children in South Africa are under the age of 6 (Hall et al. 2019). Of the 6,978,000 children below 6 years old, approximately 65% live in poverty (defined as living in a household that survives on less than R965 per month), with the gap between rich and poor becoming ever greater (ibid). With the addition of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, the situation has now only gotten worse. It is the children who live in these poorest of households that have the least opportunities for access to services and opportunities for development. Unfortunately, it is often the case that poverty limits a caregiver's ability to engage with their children, as they struggle with more urgent basic needs. This results in many children in poorer households receiving less stimulation and parent-child interaction. These children are also less likely to attend centre-based ECD programmes (ibid).

Local research shows significant inequalities that exist across the country, with substantial variation in the delivery of essential services to young children (including healthcare, social security and education) based on the area in which they live. The absence of these essential services can lead to serious long-term consequences in the well-being, health, academic success, and earning potential of these South African children. This variation in service delivery is particularly stark for those children living in rural areas of the country, who are significantly more marginalised than those children living in urban areas of South Africa. The remote geographic location of many ECD programmes as well as affordability are key factors contributing to this inequality. Studies have shown that vulnerable communities most in need of high quality ECD programmes in South Africa, have the most difficulty in accessing these services (ibid).

At a simple geographic level, it is clear to see that children in the nine provinces of the country, experience significantly different realities based on where in the country they live. For example, as seen in Table 1, 51% of children (under the age of 6) living in Limpopo live in food poor households (households living on less than R415 per month), whereas only 11% of children living in the Western Cape live in food poor households. Similarly, 21% of young children living in the Northern Cape live in households where children suffer hunger, where only 4% of children

living in Limpopo live in households where children suffer hunger. A total of 55% of children living in the Eastern Cape have inadequate access to water (defined as not having piped water on site), whereas only 6% of children living in Gauteng have inadequate access to water (ibid). Additional statistics such as these can be seen in Table 1.

ECD programmes in South Africa: enduring inequalities

Despite progress in expanding some ECD programmes in the country (with children's access to ECD programmes in South Africa having slowly increased over time; particularly in the case of Grade R), vast inequality persists in the distribution of ECD programmes, including vastly different levels of access to ECD, different levels of quality in ECD programming, and different levels of government funding. This variation is evident in terms of children's age, race, gender, disability, socio-economic status, home language of a child, as well as location (with significant inequality across provinces and across the urban/rural divide).

Early Learning Group Programmes

Table 1 presents the available data on early learning group programme provision rates for South Africa. These figures reflect the data for all children under six years of age in any form of early learning programme outside of their homes (including Grade R, ECD centres, playgroups and non-centre-based group learning programmes).

Table 1 shows that only 8% of children in the 0-2 age cohort in the Northern Cape are attending an early learning programme, compared to 30% of children in this age cohort in Gauteng attending an early learning programme. Across South Africa, 21% of children in this age cohort are in a group learning programme

“ Despite progress in expanding some ECD programmes in the country vast inequality persists in the distribution of ECD programmes, including vastly different levels of access to ECD, different levels of quality in ECD programming, and different levels of government funding.

Indicator	South Africa	Eastern Cape	Free State	Gauteng	KwaZulu-Natal	Limpopo	Mpumalanga	North West	Northern Cape	Western Cape
Population	6 978 000	876 000	326 000	1 501 000	1 408 000	906 000	613 000	497 000	149 000	702 000
Service Access										
Inadequate Water Children < 6 years without piped water on site	2 045 000 29%	484 000 55%	38 000 12%	96 000 6%	595 000 42%	423 000 47%	163 000 27%	161 000 32%	28 000 19%	56 000 8%
Poor Sanitation Children < 6 years without a toilet or VIP on site	1 557 000 22%	138 000 16%	64 000 19%	142 000 9%	343 000 24%	398 000 44%	211 000 34%	175 000 25%	19 000 13%	65 000 9%
Child Poverty Children < 6 years living in poor households (<R965 in 2015)	4 528 000 65%	679 000 77%	232 000 71%	665 000 44%	1 100 000 78%	732 000 81%	412 000 67%	343 000 69%	100 000 67%	264 000 38%
Food Poverty Children < 6 years living in food poor households (<R415 in 2015)	2 521 000 35%	439 000 47%	122 000 36%	272 000 18%	678 000 46%	481 000 51%	233 000 37%	170 000 33%	46 000 30%	79 000 11%
Workless Households Children < 6 years in households with no employed adults	2 036 000 29%	376 000 43%	112 000 34%	209 000 14%	497 000 35%	416 000 46%	178 000 29%	149 000 30%	43 000 29%	56 000 8%
Child Hunger Children < 6 years in households where children suffer from hunger	823 000 12%	64 000 7%	50 000 15%	155 000 10%	271 000 19%	33 000 4%	82 000 13%	72 000 15%	32 000 21%	64 000 9%
Stunting in children < 5 years	27%	25%	34%	34%	29%	22%	22%	27%	21%	23%
Early learning in 0-2 year olds Children 0-2 years reported to attend an early learning group programme	726 000 21%	67 000 16%	45 000 27%	233 000 30%	88 000 14%	90 000 18%	59 000 21%	44 000 18%	6 000 8%	97 000 29%
Early learning enrolment in 3-5 year olds Children 3-5 years reported to attend an early learning group or Grade R programme	2 464 000 69%	319 000 70%	133 000 81%	577 000 79%	435 000 57%	330 000 79%	219 000 66%	168 000 66%	46 000 58%	238 000 66%

Table 1. Figures underlined reflect the province(s) performing most poorly in terms of that specific indicator, and cells highlighted in grey reflect the province(s) performing best. Source: SA Early Childhood Development Review 2019.

out of the home. This provision rate increases with age; it can be seen that in the 3-5 age cohort, nationally, 69% of children are attending an early learning or Grade R programme. Within this age cohort, variation in provision rates is also seen across provinces, with only 57% of children in KwaZulu-Natal attending a programme, and 81% of children in the Free State attending a programme.

Of great concern is the data looking at provision rates across income quintiles. As seen in Figure 1, at present in South Africa, the wealthier a child's family is, the more likely that child is to attend an early learning group programme. Figure 1 presents data from the General Household Survey for early learning group programme attendance for 3-5 year old children by income quintile.

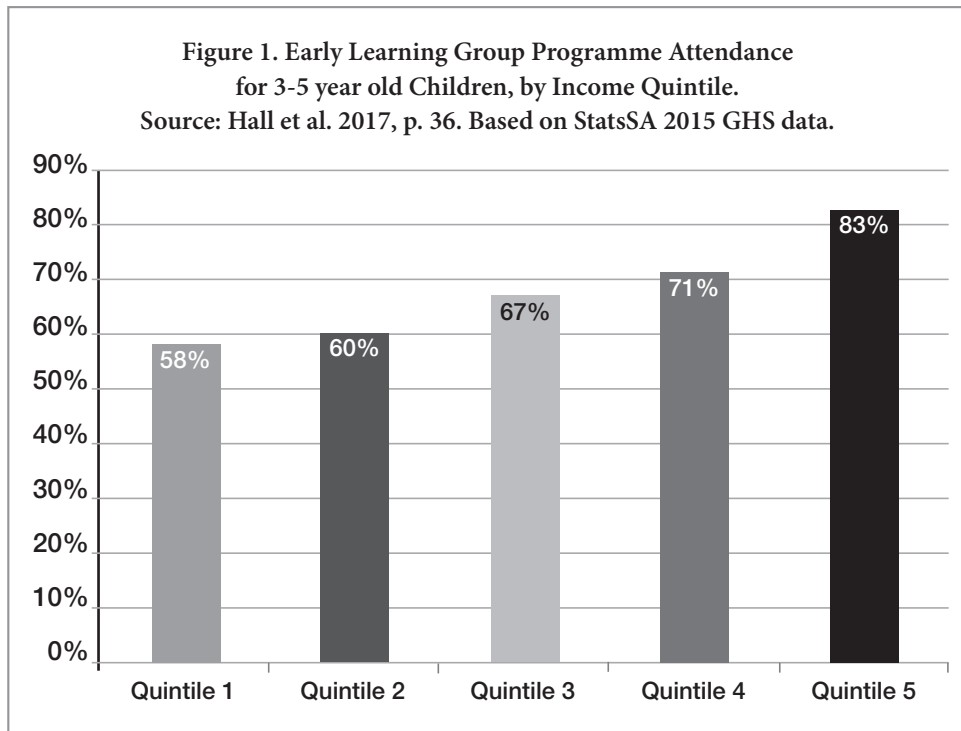


Figure 1 shows that only 58% of children (in the 3-5 year age cohort) in Quintile 1, the poorest quintile, attend an early learning group programme, compared to 83% of children in Quintile 5, the wealthiest quintile. For four year olds specifically, this inequality is even greater; a four year old in Quintile 1 has a 50% chance of

being enrolled in an early learning group programme, whereas a four year old from Quintile 5 has a 90% chance of being in provision. This data is broken down by age in Figure 2.

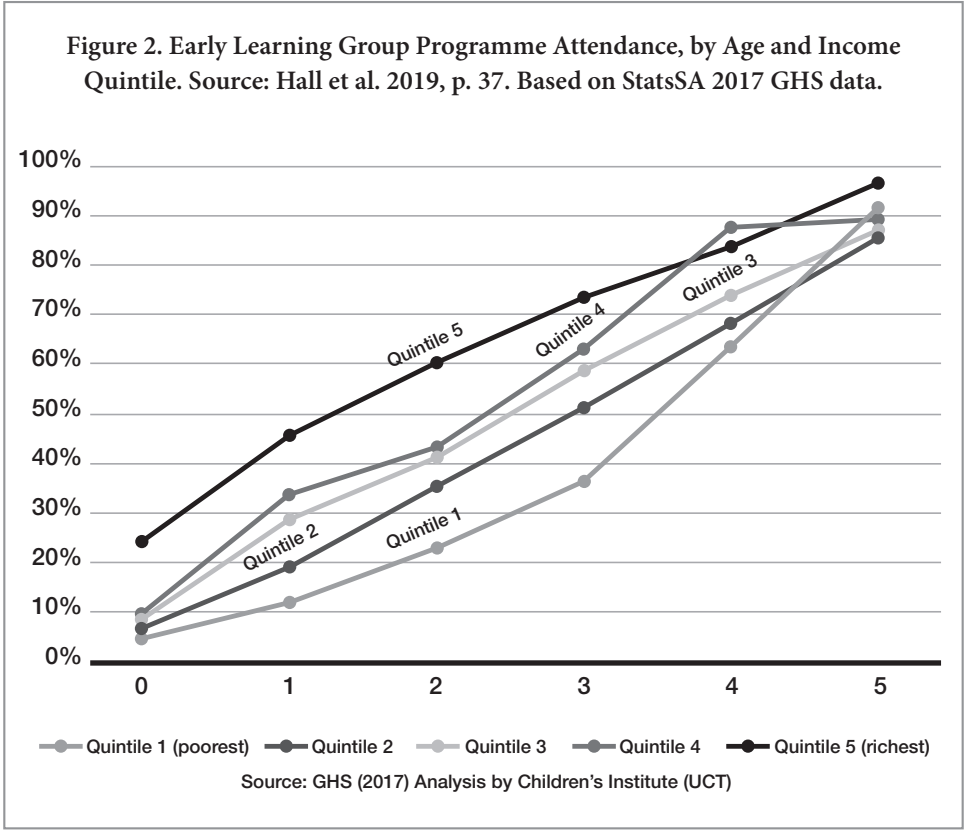


Figure 2 shows that provision rates for early learning group programmes increases with age, but is worryingly unequal across income groups in the early years of a child’s life beginning at birth. Provision becomes more equitable at age 5 as children enter the foundation phase of formal schooling (“the point where education becomes widely available, free, and compulsory”; Hall et al, 2017, p. 35). The inequality gap between Quintile 1 and Quintile 5 is particularly stark and concerning for all children under 6 years old, but particularly in the earliest years. These findings show that those children most at risk and in need of intervention (those in the poorest quintiles), are currently the least likely to access an early learning programme, whereas those children who might require less intervention are currently receiving

the highest level; thereby widening the inequality gap. Provision rates can also be explored across population groups. Figure 3 presents the data for early learning programme attendance across South Africa, broken down by population group, for 0-4 year old children specifically.

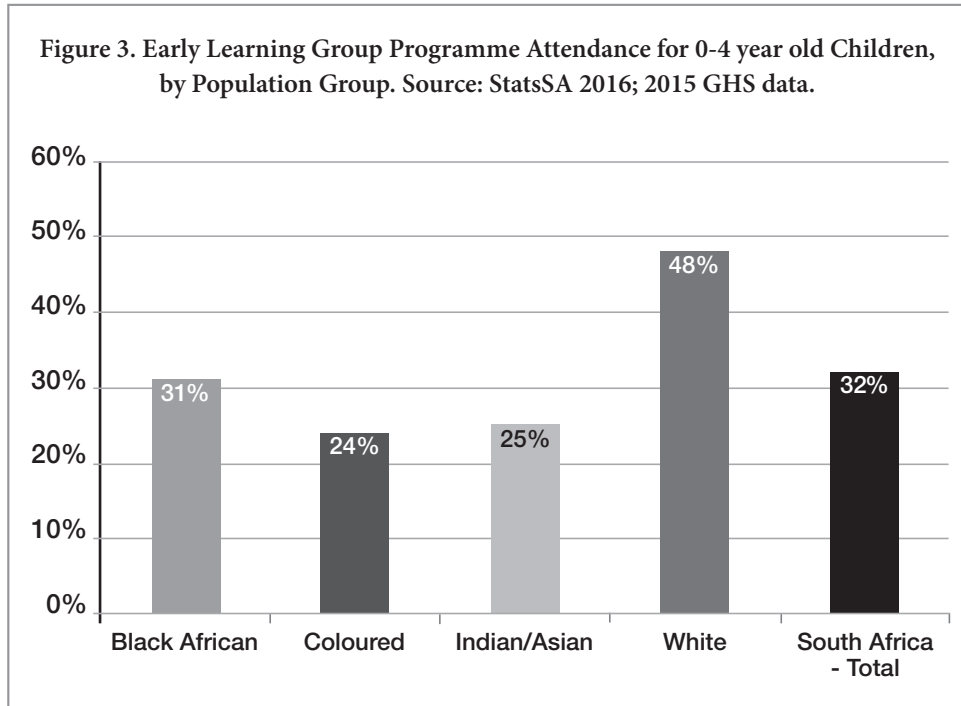


Figure 3 shows that provision rates for early learning group programming varies greatly according to population group; with children classified as ‘white’ accessing an early learning programme at much higher rates compared to any other population group. For example, the percentage of children classified as ‘coloured’ in provision (at 24%) is half the percentage of children classified as ‘white’ in provision (at 48%).

Conclusion

While ECD has been taken more seriously by national government in South Africa, as reflected in the roll-out of national ECD programmes (such a Grade R) and numerous policy initiatives, the country has not managed to make a substantial

dent in reducing inequality in the ECD sector. The reasons for this are mainly related to policy and systemic challenges resulting in poor implementation of ambitious policy (Ashley-Cooper, van Niekerk & Atmore, 2019). This includes a lack of government support for ECD policy implementation, insufficient political will to make ECD a political priority; insufficient government funding to achieve current policy objectives; and ineffectual government institutional arrangements for effective, nation-wide ECD programme implementation (Atmore, 2018).

ECD is a window of opportunity to support vulnerable young children to enter formal schooling ready to learn, competent, confident and able to flourish later in life. If we are able to reduce the inequality that is currently present in the early years, we will be able to reduce the inequality that is pervasive throughout South Africa's society. To bring about this equality for young children, and thus for society as a whole, a number of significant actions are required, by government, civil society and individuals. In a country with such high levels of poverty and marked inequality, such as South Africa, ECD must be prioritised and utilised for what it is; a cost-effective approach for reducing inequality in the country, and for increasing the economic and social capital of its citizens.

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7

Learning in Action: The Power of Parenting in Children's Holistic Development

Kerry Kassen

Who was the first person that you played with? For many of us, it was a sibling, grandparent, or parent. No one had to teach us how to do it, and the exact activity or object of play is probably lost to memory. But that experience – when our parents sat down next to us and interacted, even if only for a few minutes – creates lasting memories, and has ripple effects on our self-esteem and brain development throughout our lives. In that moment, our caregivers were interested in what we were doing, what we said and what we thought. They were asking questions and entering a world of our making. To a child, nothing could be better. What changed when we grew up, and when did we forget how to play?

Not only can we forget how to play, but we can also lose sight of the power and challenges inherent in play. We fall into the trap of separating learning and playing. Even the language we use about the typical school day reinforces this false dichotomy: We have lessons and ‘break’, classes and ‘free time’. Furthermore, we are sometimes painfully unaware of the responsibility and workload that our early child development (ECD) practitioners are tasked with until we, as parents, have had to assume both of those roles.

For those of us fortunate enough to be able to send our kids to an ECD centre, we drop them off with the hope that they will get all the skills needed to do well at a formal school and the world beyond it... because that is where learning ‘happens’.

It harks back to an ‘old school’ way of thinking about education as a one-way conveyor belt into careers and industry.

This past year, however, has brought many of us “back to earth” with a bump. Yes, 2020 has been a year like no other; there are a million memes to describe it. For me, it will go down as the year my work life and home life collided. In my day job at the LEGO Foundation, my role is to advocate for the power of learning through play. So, you would think that I would be completely at ease in this dual role, but I was not. Being a working parent, a teacher, and a playmate is hard work. It demands energy, time, and focus, and even more so in a year of profound anxiety and uncertainty like this one – and that’s when it is needed more than ever.

Joining the dots

Thankfully, ‘Learning through Play’ is just the tool we need to address uncertainty, parental bonding, and to prepare for the future. We engage our senses as we play, creating new connections in our grey matter, and strengthening the bonds between us. Added to this, responsive and attentive caregivers create ‘psychological safety’ and trust, so they send confident kids into the world, ready to unlock opportunities for early learning.

ECD advocates have been banging this tin-can-drum for years, but it has taken a societal shift for the idea to gain the kudos it deserves. In 2016, the World Economic Forum published *The Future of Jobs* (World Economic Forum, 2016), an eye-opening report that places so-called ‘soft skills’ and personal capabilities as central to preparing for an uncertain future. These include critical problem-solving, creativity, emotional intelligence, flexibility, resilience, communication, and collaboration. This will be the age of mind over muscle – and learning through play is how we prepare for it.

Moreover, long before homework and ‘subjects’ consume their days, children

“ The powerful and simple truth is that play is learning in action, making parents (and caregivers) our first playmates and educators.

integrate hundreds of new skills through play and experience. The powerful and simple truth is that play is learning in action, making parents (and caregivers) our first playmates and educators.

Our LEGO Play Well report (Lego Foundation, 2018a) shows that parents – former play experts themselves – are willing and ready to take on the challenge with the next generation. Nine out of ten parents said they enjoy this playtime as much as their child does, that it helps them get to know their children better, and that they feel play is good for their own wellbeing too.

The benefits of play

In both primary research and meta-analysis, there is a growing body of evidence on the benefits of learning through play (Barker et al., 2014; Alfieri, Brooks, Aldrich & Tenenbaum, 2011; Zosh et al., 2017). The many forms of play are as varied as its benefits. There is a game, a daydream, or a three-legged-race for every skill's focus area, and many of them at once. Play can be quiet and contained, loud and messy. It can be structured, unstructured, repetitive, novel, child-led, or parent-guided. And it is a free tool that we already have in our toolbox, one which doesn't come with any rules.

Team games encourage collaboration. Collages demand planning. Make-believe and storytelling spurs creativity and communication. We hone our fine motor skills in a family game of Pick-up-Sticks, and – almost inevitably – our conflict management skills too. Even disagreeing over boardgames, viewed through this lens, offers a chance to learn about negotiation, numeracy, compromise, and ourselves.

These are just a few examples of the way play can be elevated. This realisation – drawn from extensive conversations with experts – led us to establish five characteristics of play that lead to deeper learning (Lego Foundation, 2018b). These are meaningful, joyful, iterative, socially interactive, and actively engaging. That's face-to-face, fun, and focused to non-ECD practitioners. These types of play can impart valuable skills, like critical thinking and problem-solving, and they are scalable, based on age and capabilities. Importantly, the presence of parents engaging in these types of

play promotes that deeper learning we aim for.

Not all heroes wear capes (or stethoscopes)

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested people profoundly. It has taken a toll on the economy generally, and small business in particular, including ECD centres, many of which have closed, possibly permanently, through the impact of the lockdown.

Parents, too, saw a shift in their daily combined responsibilities of primary caregiving and learning facilitation. In between working from home and managing momentous news cycles, many working parents also donned the cap of ‘teacher’ during the lockdown. I can only speak for myself, but it’s been exhausting and exhilarating in equal measure to watch my young daughter navigate 2020, and to get to know her in this new context. It also emphasised that my role in her learning is critical and an essential component to her future.

The coronavirus crisis has cast into sharp relief the depth and breadth of the challenges we face, now and for the next generation. If we are to kindle those future-ready skills in our children, a robust and responsive ECD sector is a cornerstone. And the systems that support ECD programmes – from guardians to government – are the green foundation on which we must begin building.

We’re all on the same side

Just as the ECD systems are a game-changer for children, recognising parents as partners in this process, is too. It is an opportunity for the whole ECD sector – from public to civil service, advocates, and academics – as well as the ‘whole child’ around whom these ideas pivot.

To borrow from the language of business, play

“ Play is not only a catalyst for learning and development; it is an investment that has no start-up costs, no long timeframes, no logistical constraints, and begins to pay dividends immediately.

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8

The Impact of COVID-19 on the ECD Sector

Theodora Lutuli

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on various sectors across the globe. For the early childhood development sector in South Africa, it has had many unexpected consequences.

Exposing the injustices of a blanket approach to policies within the ECD sector

It all began pre-COVID-19, before the government-imposed lockdown, when already existing and fully established ECD centres (some in existence from as far back as the 1980's) had to once again go through a process of rezoning – a process nobody could ignore as it had major financial implications. As tedious and tiresome as it was, we all embarked on it. Unregistered sites were hopeful that finally they would become legal. Little did we know that this was the beginning of our problems as an ECD sector.

Policies were in place to guide the rezoning process; however, it was largely impossible to achieve because of historical legacy challenges that existed in the townships, especially in informal areas. Government expectations could not be met because they were unrealistic; i.e. government did not approve of an ECD centre that was erected as an informal structure (shack), despite the fact that the children who attended these centres, and their families, lived in informal dwellings themselves. The expectation was for ECD practitioners and/or owners to provide formal structures within informal areas, which is a contradiction in terms. The real

question is, is it reasonable for children living in informal areas and in unfavourable living environments to be expected to have a formal learning space? In the absence of tailored guidelines for informal ECD centres, a blanket approach was used which resulted in zoning for the majority of ECD centres not being achieved. This resulted in the registration processes of informal ECD centres being negatively affected, which of course had an adverse impact on funding assistance from the Department of Social Development (DSD) for these centres.

The silent pandemic

The exclusion of disadvantaged groups in the ECD discourse

COVID-19 struck and a government-imposed lockdown was implemented – the ‘haves’ could not survive and the ‘have-nots’ crumbled. Those ECD centres whose only source of income was parent’s fees, which are generally less than R400 per month (due to our geographic area of operation and the inability of parents to afford higher fees), left many centres with no income – imminent job losses were the order of the day. Subsequently, many ECD centres have had to close their doors as they struggled to keep their heads afloat during these difficult and uncertain times.

The conditions for the re-opening of ECD centres during lockdown, as outlined in the Disaster Management Act, failed to address the existing challenges in our disadvantaged areas. When the government announced the re-opening of the ECD sector, many of our practitioners did not fully understand the content of the Act and the responsibilities that were allotted to them. The legislation put the responsibility of child safety squarely on the principals’ shoulders and held them personally liable in the event of a break-out, or worse still, COVID-19 related deaths. We feel this is unfair. The conditions for readiness to open have been largely unreasonable given the poor resources available to the majority of ECD centres. These conditions included:

1. Procuring of masks for all children
2. Procuring masks for all staff
3. Provision of hand sanitiser for children and ECD staff
4. Provision of paper towels

5. Provision of soap
6. Staff training regarding COVID-19 protocols

Some sectors were granted relief funds and assistance in the implementation of these conditions, however the ECD sector received no government support in this regard. This, in light of the fact that we have had no income since March 2020. This is a clear indication of how our government does not prioritise us as a sector.

To add insult to injury, the government thereafter announced that it will avail R1,3 billion for the employment of youth as ECD compliance officers – this when many ECD centres were being forced to close down their businesses due to lack of income. As principals, we strongly object to this proposal as there are sufficient reputable NPO's who competently fulfil the role of oversight and support to ECD centres.

We fully support campaigns that are against this move as we understand how many households will be adversely affected by the decision. For example, the lack of daily provision of nutritious meals by ECD centres is a significant challenge, because most parents of the children in our care are low-income earners, who have lost their modest earning potential.

Women empowering women

Women have always understood that jobs are scarce in our country. They have taken it upon themselves to create job opportunities that benefit other women in their impoverished communities and have understood the importance of skill transfer between women. They have also understood the critical role played by ECD programmes as the foundation phase which contributes to school readiness of children. The knowledge that children require for their cognitive, emotional, social and

“ If fighting is the only way to change mindsets in this sector, so be it, as we represent the voiceless, as mothers, teachers, wives, businesswomen and proud South African citizens. We have given our lives to the sector and we will not give up until there is change for future generations.

physical development is emphasised during this early stage of their lives. Effective ECD programmes have been proven to aid in the holistic development and stimulation of growth in the child. Many of the women, who are practitioners in the ECD field, have undergone formal training, possess the requisite skills and have invaluable experience. Unfortunately, this was not enough to overcome the current challenges facing them. The working conditions, infrastructure, compliance with government regulations and minimum standards, as well as the lack of financial support from government have proven to be great challenges in the ECD sector.

Inclusion within ECD

Which are the voices to listen to?

It is most disheartening and extremely demoralising for us, as women, to think that the struggle of the women who marched for equality and inclusivity in 1956 remains our struggle today. When are we going to be celebrated as women who have a contribution to make in this country? Women remain on the margins of this society. The song, *Senzenina* ('What have we done'), rings true as I write these views. As a society, we are shocked with the number of school dropouts, yet our government did not care to invest very much when it came to their foundation phase. Policy makers are happy to work in isolation without involving us as the implementors – we are just expected to implement without questioning even though we are on the ground and are exposed to these children on a daily basis. But if fighting is the only way to change mindsets in this sector, so be it, as we represent the voiceless, as mothers, teachers, wives, businesswomen and proud South African citizens. Madiba once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world", and our aim is to change, or impact, our country before the world. We have given our lives to the sector and we will not give up until there is change for future generations.

9

Supporting our ECD Workforce

Sarah Atmore

I'm someone who never intended to work in the ECD sector, yet by some twists and turns of fate, here I am – enjoying the work that I do, and grateful for the passionate and obviously dedicated ECD principals whom I have met and been able to work with. I say “passionate” and “dedicated” because I’m not sure that they would be able to withstand the constant battles and trials that I see many of them facing were they not truly passionate about giving the children they serve a good start in life.

Having worked in the sector now for several years, far shorter than most of the principals whom I come into contact with, I have found myself with a list of questions, frustrations and thoughts that are often entertained in my head late at night when my head hits the pillow. I discuss some of these questions here.

How do the principals of ECD centres manage to make ends meet?

I am not talking about the principals of more affluent centres who have a good portion of parents that pay decent fees for their children’s attendance at ECD centres. Rather, I am talking about the principals of ECD centres where the fees are minuscule, many parents don’t pay fees, and for some or another reason, they do not receive financial support from government. What is it that sustains these

centres? How do principals manage to pay their staff, pay their bills and still take home something at the end of each month to support themselves and hopefully put something aside for the future? Many of these principals end up paying themselves last; taking home amounts that would barely cover my food bill for a month (and I don't eat extravagantly). We need to somehow start paying these principals a fair amount for their labour. Yes, many do it for "the love of the children" but this doesn't put food on tables, it does not help them buy all of the necessities they require, and it certainly doesn't give principals an option of saving and building some kind of financial security.

Who looks after the mental health of ECD principals?

There is an analogy that most people will be familiar with, about holding a glass of water. When one has to hold the glass of water for a minute it's easy. If one has to hold it for an hour it becomes harder, and if one is asked to hold that glass of water for a day their arm will most likely feel as though it is going to snap in half by the end of the day. If we think of the issues and frustrations that ECD principals face daily as a glass of water, then continuing the metaphor, many of the ECD principals who I have met have been holding multiple glasses of water for months on end and I am surprised we haven't seen more "broken arms", so to speak. If we don't start considering the mental health of principals, then I fear we may end up losing valuable principals from the ECD sector. And even if they don't leave the sector, surely we can do better than to repay their hard work and service with frustration after unnecessary frustration? I have seen principals pushed to their wits' end. I have sat with colleagues and wondered about how much more these principals can withstand without having nervous breakdowns. I have seen breakdowns take place, and slip by unnoticed. The fact that many of these

“ If we don't start considering the mental health of principals, then I fear we may end up losing valuable principals from the ECD sector. The fact that many of these principals endure is a testament to their strength and resilience, but that does not mean we should allow it to continue.

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How do we balance what funders want and what ECD centres need?

I have been at the point in projects before where a funder wants to do some work at an ECD centre, I have met with and chatted to the principal, and we have discussed what infrastructure upgrade work could be beneficial. I get quotes and am given the go-ahead by the funder to do something we believe will improve the ECD centre, sometimes just a little, sometimes significantly. I then revisit the centre and explain to the principal what the funder has decided they can do at the centre, asking – will this be alright and are you happy to go ahead? On a number of occasions, the response to this question is, “Yes, it is fine. We don’t have a choice”. On hearing this response, I am left with an uneasy feeling in my stomach; questioning whether this is something that the principal genuinely wants or is it something that they are accepting knowing that other help or offers of assistance are unlikely to come along anytime soon. Are we truly empowering principals in their situations? How much room is there to negotiate with funders, to strike a better balance between what the principal wants, what the ECD centre needs and what the funder is willing to give? Yes, painting a bare Vibracrete wall bright green will be an improvement on what was there and perhaps it is money well spent. But what if the principal would prefer to use the money to pay her staff? Or towards getting plans approved for her building so that she can get a step closer to being registered? Who is best positioned to know what the ECD centre will benefit from?

We must try to create an environment where principals can feel free to speak up about their needs. We must recognise the balance of power in the relationship between ECD principals and those wanting to assist, and be mindful of the fact that without ECD centres and the principals who run them, we as ECD NPOs would not survive. Are we being service-minded, are we there to serve and support them? Or are we there to dictate to them what they should want and how they should act?

One way in which we can navigate this is to use our common sense and our

judgement and not suggest things that we do not feel are appropriate. But is it our role to decide what is appropriate and what is not? Here, empowering ECD principals and teachers plays a role. They must know they have a voice. They must be allowed to speak up for themselves AND when they speak we must open our ears and listen. We must also carefully examine our relationship with funders and be mindful of the power dynamics in those relationships too. Here we must speak up to the funders about what we feel is right or not and they too will hopefully listen when we speak.

How do we expect ECD principals to create an environment where children can thrive when they are faced with these and other issues? I believe that working with principals, listening to them, carefully examining these and the many other challenges that they face, is one way in which we can continue to improve the quality of ECD offered to children. This also requires taking a long, hard look at ourselves as people working in and with the ECD sector. These are not always comfortable things to do. But as I have heard said before and have been struck by, “If a conversation is hard, it’s probably the one worth having”.

10 Baby Steps to Changing Children's Values

Kanya Padayachee

Violence in all its hideous forms abounds in our society, and our current culture reflects a serious lack of social responsibility and an unhealthy compulsion to achieve individual success at any cost.

Against this background, children are not likely to develop into caring and socially responsible adults, since a great deal of their learning and behaviour is derived from observing and imitating the behaviour of people around them.

Early childhood development starts in pregnancy and extends into the ninth year of a child's life. Recent studies have shown, however, that the first thousand days in a child's life are a period of especially rapid neurological development, and provide a huge opportunity for strong, healthy growth. So those first two years are when the foundations for learning capacity, emotional well-being and social behaviour are established.

The earlier an intervention is made during the nine-year period of early childhood, the greater the likelihood of long-term returns,

“ The earlier an intervention is made during the nine-year period of early childhood, the greater the likelihood of long-term returns, including responsible citizenship and effective parenting of future generations.

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The Early Childhood Development (ECD) project of Durban's Gandhi Development Trust is a curriculum intervention designed to instil a core set of universal values in children – underpinned by ubuntu – through training caregivers.

It is common knowledge that caregivers are in a good position to help young children understand desirable character traits and values and to model them. Young children often idolise their caregivers, watch them closely and try to emulate their behaviours.

Rather than foisting a set of values on children and perhaps dooming the effort to failure, young children can be guided towards making sound moral judgements through social interactions with their caregivers and other significant adults.

The social impact of the ECD project on values is that children, in these critical years, are shown ways of relating to others and to the environment in caring and socially responsible ways.

In 2020, the project, funded by the Sibaya Community Trust, and targeting poor and disadvantaged communities, completed many years of training ECD caregivers in the values programme.

Launched with a pilot in the Inanda, Ntuzuma and Kwa Mashu (INK) townships in 2014, the project has grown, step by step, from 14 trainees in the first and second years to 98 in 2016.

The core-values training programme is supported by parallel training in the importance of wholesome food, effective physical development and creativity through the arts. These parallel trainings collectively help ensure holistic development for a child. This programme has been achieved with the support of the Durban University of Technology's Community Engagement Programme.

The third phase of the values programme extended the project further through training five ECD trainers from each of five KwaZulu-Natal areas – Folweni, Kwa

Makutha, Umlazi, Hammarsdale and Umzinto – and tasking them with training a minimum of 20 ECD caregivers each from preschools in their areas. This means that nearly 4,000 children are being reached by the programme.

This community-centred design affords communities a sense of their own agency in the programme, and promotes its growth and development from within communities. It also helps to create opportunities for communities to adapt the programme to local conditions and encourages community members to participate.

Our evaluation of participating preschools, together with anecdotes from trainees, all confirm the progressive impact on the caregivers and the children in their care. These range from caregivers' improved understanding of how to manage children calmly to an increase in the children's respect, caring, co-operation, motivation and ability to solve peer conflicts.

Clearly early childhood education is a much-needed intervention which is making a significant impact. No wonder parents and communities are clamouring that this sort of educational enrichment be extended as widely as possible.

At the celebration marking the completion of the first three years of the project – each year progressively building on and consolidating the gains of the previous ones, when almost 100 trainees received their certificates with great excitement, Kudzai Mqingwana, funding manager of the Sibaya Community Trust, acknowledged the innovative project concept and model and its success thus far. In encouraging the current cohort of trained caregivers to uphold and implement the programme's values, she reminded them of their impact on the children, and the commonly accepted understanding that children model the adults around them. "Often, the teacher is more important at home than parents: you make an incredible impact on our children, so please be the champions of these values. Teach our children, and let them come home and teach us these values so that positive change can be seen at home." Mqingwana said.

Commenting on the collective responsibility of our communities, she said: "We want to see the spread of values, where you teach a few people and they teach many others... The way I am affects you; the way you are affects me, Umuntu Continue

ngumuntu ngabantu to be the good foundation for our children's lives.”

The next phase of the values programme will see a much greater involvement of parents. This will reinforce the values learnt in the preschools so that they can have a long-lasting impact.

While the best chance of developing caring and socially responsible citizens can be achieved by starting in the earliest years of a child's life, it must be said that central to achieving this long-term objective is involving parents and families and, in some way, the whole community.

11 The Role ECD Forums Play in Strengthening ECD Centres

Jessica Blom

Early childhood development (ECD) programmes are critical in determining the early development, health and learning of young children. In South Africa, there are huge inequalities in the provision of ECD programmes as many young children do not have access to quality early education and care. Early learning programmes are a critical mechanism to break the cycle of poverty and inequality as they reduce the differences in learning potential between children before they enter formal schooling. Attending an ECD centre offers a good opportunity for early learning to take place but many ECD centres are unable to offer quality early education and care.

In South Africa, community-based forums first emerged in response to the Apartheid government and, post-Apartheid, they developed into critical spaces that encourage active citizenry and fight for basic needs that are not being met. These forums provide a platform for communities to collectively discuss issues and reach consensus on how to solve problems. In South Africa, community forums are seen as essential to enhancing democracy as they provide communities with the platform through which to participate in the governance structures of their area (HSRC, 2015:6).

If we are going to improve the quality of ECD programmes in South Africa, we need changes that reach beyond a single classroom or programme. We need to

develop a comprehensive system of services that involves building strong relationships within communities (Buysee, Wesley & Skinner, 1999:236). This is where ECD forums come in. ECD forums play a critical role in building connections and strengthening ECD centres across the country.

ECD forums are a voluntary network of local ECD centres that serve as a representative body for a community of ECD centres. ECD forums are linked to a geographical area where the ECD centres in that area are able to join the ECD forum. How formal an ECD forum is varies from place to place. Some ECD forums are highly formalised with an elected management committee, membership fees and a constitution, while others are less formalised. ECD forums have also not emerged in all areas across the country.

“If we are going to improve the quality of ECD programmes in South Africa, we need changes that reach beyond a single classroom or programme. We need to develop a comprehensive system of services that involves building strong relationships within communities.”

ECD forums play a critical role in connecting ECD centres with external institutions and with each other, as well as promoting community development and activism. They develop connections with local government, provincial government, NPOs, and link ECD centres to outside training opportunities. This is critical as creating these relationships is needed for the scaling up of ECD services to take place sustainably. Without the connections between ECD centres and external institutions, the provision and execution of large-scale ECD services is extremely difficult to do. Linking ECD centres to outside institutions builds the social capital of the ECD centre and the community. Social capital is needed for community development and creates the bridge between poor communities and the resources available to them through external institutions.

A critical role of ECD forums is that they provide an efficient platform for the distribution of information. Government often uses ECD forums as a mechanism to disseminate important information to ECD centres. This is done by either an official attending forum meetings or by contacting the chairperson of the forum, who then

relays the information to the other members. This platform is significant given the high numbers of unregistered ECD centres who are not on provincial databases. In addition, NPOs consult with ECD forums when they enter into a community as the forum is seen as a legitimate 'gatekeeper'. The NPOs use the platform of the ECD forums to introduce their programmes and to source information about the ECD centres in an area. The ECD forum also plays a role in providing access to training opportunities for its members, as these are often advertised through the forum. In this way, ECD forums act as a representative body for ECD centres.

ECD forums also create connections between ECD centres. Developing strong relationships within communities is essential for creating a comprehensive system of ECD services in South Africa. The forums create a space for ECD centres to provide information, advice and guidance on a variety of topics to one another. The forum members discuss issues and provide assistance on how to solve problems, drawing on their collective experience and knowledge. For example, ECD forums provide guidance to each other on the process of registration, on how to comply with the relevant norms and standards, and on the subsidisation process. ECD forums are instrumental in supporting and assisting newly established ECD centres, which would otherwise be isolated from critical information about early childhood education and care.

As ECD forums play a role in setting the standard of ECD provision in their area; this increases the overall quality of ECD. This occurs as forum members share best practice and help centres who are requiring support on and improvements to the provision of their programmes and services. The ECD centres also share materials and resources with each other. Often more well-established ECD centres provide excess resources to other ECD centres that need them, thus improving the overall quality of ECD provision in the area they serve. Forums also promote community activism and on occasion organise protests to put pressure on government on issues that affect the sector.

There are also many possible ways in which ECD forums can play a greater role in strengthening centres. For example, ECD forums can play a role in promoting consolidated planning amongst ECD centres, particularly around the learning programme. Forums can also leverage resources for ECD centres and co-ordinate

bulk buying of essential items.

ECD forums are a critical mechanism to enhancing the quality of ECD provision and for the scaling up of sustainable ECD services. Given the important role ECD forums can play, areas that do not have ECD forums must be encouraged to set up one. ECD forums need to be empowered and supported to further strengthen ECD centres in South Africa. The valuable work of ECD forums is often unrecognised within the broader ECD sector. ECD forums need to be heard and their knowledge and expertise drawn on to inform policy and programme development.

Note:

This article is based on a Master's dissertation that looks at two ECD forums in the Western Cape. The dissertation can be obtained from: <https://bit.ly/3ccsm6X>

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12 Registering and Funding Home-based ECD programmes: Understanding the Legal, Policy, Social and Economic Case

Rebecca Hickman and Grace Matlhape

The government's goal is to achieve universal access to early childhood development (ECD) by 2030. In order to meet this goal and to fulfil the government's responsibilities to children under the Children's Act and the Constitution, inclusive regulatory and funding approaches must be used which enable a range of ECD programmes to thrive.

In particular, it is important that *home and community-based ECD programmes* are not excluded from registration and funding. These types of programmes often serve poor communities and are relied upon by vulnerable families for both childcare and access to appropriate learning and development opportunities. Denying these programmes access to the subsidies that would help them to improve, will further marginalise poor children.

We use a wide lens to consider the legal, economic, social and ethical basis for registering and funding all types and sizes of *home-based* ECD programmes. Most of the points apply equally to community-based ECD programmes.

Introduction

There are three main types of ECD programmes that can lawfully be run from a home:

- full-time programmes for more than six children
- full-time programmes with six or fewer children (referred to as ‘childminders’)
- part-time or sessional programmes (such as playgroups)

Full-time home-based ECD programmes for more than six children fall under the definition of ‘*partial care*’ in the Children’s Act (‘the Act’). The powers and duties given to provincial departments of Social Development (DSD) in respect of partial care therefore apply to these programmes.

Part-time or small home-based programmes fall under the definition of ‘*ECD programme*’ in the Act. This interpretation is confirmed by the National Integrated ECD Policy (NIECDP), which describes these programmes as types of non-centre based ECD programme. They must therefore be regulated and funded in line with the Act’s provisions on ECD programmes.

What is the problem?

Insufficient recognition in government of the vital role of home-based ECD programmes has resulted in exclusionary and inconsistent approaches to their registration and funding. This, in turn, continues to make it more difficult for the ECD subsidy to reach and benefit poor children.

In addition, there is a lack of clarity over whose responsibility it is to register and fund small home-based ECD programmes with six or fewer children. These are a pre-existing platform which should be supported and resourced to provide structured early learning opportunities for children.

The quality case

It’s not where, it’s what – Quality ECD can be delivered in a wide range of settings.

Across all types of ECD programmes, the evidence suggests that positive child outcomes depend on the presence of quality rather than on the particular modality

(or setting) (Forry et al., 2013; Ang, Brooke and Stephen, 2017; Rao et al., 2012; Hasan., 2017). The components of quality highlighted in research include trained ECD practitioners, minimum adult-child ratios, good pedagogy (in particular, quality child-adult interactions that support children's language and learning), and a structured routine that includes play, storytelling and physical activities. Importantly, these dimensions of quality can be found in a wide range of ECD programmes, including home-based programmes.

The lessons for policy are helpful and encourage a flexible understanding of the different ways in which young children can access early learning and development opportunities. In particular, it is important that an inclusive regulatory framework allows quality ECD programmes to thrive, whatever the setting.

“Across all types of ECD programmes, the evidence suggests that positive child outcomes depend on the presence of *quality* rather than on the particular *modality* (or setting)... It is important that an inclusive regulatory framework allows *quality* ECD programmes to thrive, whatever the setting.

The pro-children case

The best interests of the child must be the government's main consideration in the regulation and funding of ECD programmes.

The Children's Act gives effect to the constitutional rights of children, including, 'that the best interests of a child are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child.' (Section 2)

Many children across South Africa attend home-based ECD programmes. These children have the right not to experience discrimination, and it is in their best interests to attend programmes that are properly regulated and funded. To ensure this, government funding strategies must focus on *reaching children*, not on

reaching certain types of ECD programmes.

The pro-poor case

Many poor families rely on home-based ECD programmes and live in areas where it is difficult to build new purpose-built ECD centres.

The National Development Plan 2030 prioritises access to essential services for poor households. Poor children in South Africa are concentrated in under-resourced communities, which often have inferior access to formal services including purpose-built ECD centres. Policy approaches that withhold funding or oversight from home-based ECD programmes are therefore likely to further marginalise the poorest children.

In 2014, the government reported that, ‘over two million children live in backyard dwellings or shacks in informal settlements; over 40% of these children are within the particularly vulnerable 0–5-year age group.’ (African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 2014). Land shortage and tenure issues in these communities and other urban areas mean that of necessity more ECD programmes must be run out of existing premises, including homes. In 2015, about two-thirds of children in the poorest income quintile lived in rural areas (Hall and Sambu, 2016) – this equates to over 1.5 million very poor 0 to 6 year-olds. The lower population density in rural areas often makes it less viable to build new ECD centres.

The equitable access case

Children in workless households should be able to benefit from early learning opportunities.

It is a government priority that all children should benefit from the learning and development opportunities provided by ECD programmes. Recent data suggests that about 2.5 million of the poorest 0 to 5 year-olds live in households where no adult is employed. (Statistics South Africa, 2018). These children are some of the most

marginalised but are highly unlikely to access full-time centre-based ECD provision because their parents cannot afford the fees and do not require childcare. This means that free or low-cost home and community-based playgroups are likely to be an important way of ensuring that some of the most vulnerable children can access early learning opportunities.

“Free or low-cost home and community-based playgroups are likely to be an important way of ensuring that some of the most vulnerable children can access early learning opportunities.”

The practical case

The government needs to reach poor children where they are.

The government aims to achieve universal access to ECD by 2030. As families are free to choose which types of ECD programmes they access, in order to achieve this goal, the government will have to fund the types of programmes that poor children actually attend. The 2014 Audit suggests that over half of ECD centres are run from homes, informal structures and community venues. Among unregistered centres (which are likely to be attended primarily by poor children), about two-thirds are run from homes and community premises. This must be the starting point for government registration and funding strategies.

The scale-up case

The most viable way of rapidly widening today's children's access to ECD programmes is through home-based provision.

Rapid scale-up of ECD provision is required if government is to achieve its universal access goals. The speed of scale-up of ECD programmes is slowed if it relies on the construction of new infrastructure. In contrast, home and community-based ECD programmes use pre-existing premises and therefore do not have the long lead-in times of new infrastructure projects.

In the short-term, therefore, to ensure that new ECD places are created for today's 0-5 year-olds, it will be necessary to register and subsidise programmes in existing premises. This should include supporting small home-based programmes to formalise and, potentially, expand their provision.

The affordability case

Home-based ECD programmes are cheaper to set up and run.

There are many pressures on government spending and it will be challenging for government to achieve universal access to ECD on current budget forecasts. If significant funding is diverted into large infrastructure projects for new ECD centres, less money is available for the subsidisation of new places. It therefore makes better economic sense to support the expansion and improvement of ECD programmes in existing premises, including homes, by investing in better infrastructure, resources and training for these types of settings.

The employment and enterprise case

Home-based ECD programmes create employment and enable micro enterprise.

ECD programmes create direct employment and contribute to the government's goals of supporting micro enterprises and creating more jobs for unemployed young adults. Home-based ECD programmes are an example of micro enterprises that are easy to set up (as low initial investment is required) and that are relatively low risk (as demand is predictable). Crucially, they contribute to economic activity *within* the poorest communities.

There are strong synergies between public employment schemes and home-based ECD programmes (National Planning Commission, 2012). Successful partnerships between schemes such as the EPWP and CWP are already enabling unemployed people to set up as small-scale, home-based ECD providers.

The pro-women case

Home-based ECD programmes create and promote employment for women.

It is a government priority to support more women to work and to be economically active (National Planning Commission, 2012, pg 43). Home-based ECD programmes create direct employment for the women who work there and enable women-owned enterprises.

ECD programmes also create childcare places for women who want to go out and work. Without easy access to affordable childcare, women from poor homes are more likely to be forced to stay at home. This undercuts gender equality by denying women the choices available to men, including the opportunity to be financially autonomous. It is also bad for society as a whole, constraining a significant part of the workforce and reducing economic output overall.

The mixed provision case

Home-based ECD programmes are a key feature of a mixed model of ECD provision.

It is a government commitment to support a mixed model of ECD provision, including home and community-based ECD programmes. Home-based ECD programmes are permitted under the Children's Act, encouraged under the National Development Plan, and prioritised in the NIECDP as an important form of provision on the continuum of ECD services (Department of Social Development, 2015, pg 69). In addition, in their 2019 Manifesto, the ANC commit to, 'Promote innovation on different models for delivering home and community-based ECD.'

The NIECDP also specifically prioritises the registration and subsidisation of 'childminders', who are envisaged to play a key role in scaling up the 'provision of universal developmentally appropriate early learning opportunities for young children from birth' (Department of Social Development, 2015).

The market case

Parents choose provision and government must support and enable quality.

In South Africa, ECD is a market-led sector, dominated by private providers. Until and unless the state becomes a universal provider, parents will continue to choose what types of ECD programmes they wish to access, and providers will respond to demand.

ECD is also considered a public good, and therefore within the market framework, government has an important role to play in ensuring equitable access and promoting quality. Where home-based ECD programmes emerge in response to market demand, the government's role is to support and fund them to ensure that basic health, safety and quality standards are met.

The legal case – the Children's Act

Home-based ECD programmes are registrable and fundable under the Children's Act.

The Children's Act makes the registration and funding of all types of ECD programmes the responsibility of provincial DSDs – there are no exceptions based on modality.

The key consideration for registration is whether or not the programme complies with the norms and standards, and other registration requirements. The key consideration for funding is whether or not the programme is registered. In other words, the type of premises *per se* is not a legal consideration for the purposes of either registration or funding.

Furthermore, the Act states that 'any person or organisation' may provide an ECD programme. Read together with the preceding duty to prioritise funding in poor communities, where children in those communities are served by home-based ECD programmes, there is a clear legal imperative to fund those programmes.

The legal case – the role of municipalities

The Children's Act makes provision for only the registration function to be delegated to municipalities, not the funding function – and then only when strict conditions are met.

While the Act allows for the registration function to be delegated to municipalities, a provincial DSD must first ensure that key conditions relating to the capacity and competence of the municipality to discharge the function are met. A written agreement must then be put in place that contains various prescribed particulars. The building of the necessary capacity and structures for municipalities to fulfil the registration function has not yet been achieved – or even attempted. In most areas, it would not therefore currently be possible for provincial DSDs to assign this function to municipal level and to be compliant with the Act.

There are no provisions in the Act which provide for the funding function to be delegated to municipalities. DSD's current position that small ECD programmes with six or fewer children should be registered and funded by municipalities, not provincial DSDs, is not therefore consistent with the legal framework.

The legal case – the Constitution

The Constitution provides a powerful basis for the imperative to register and fund all types of home-based ECD programmes.

The Constitution sets out a raft of rights in respect of children, which must be the over-riding consideration for all policy and law affecting children. If any regulatory or funding strategy or approach has the effect of excluding ECD programmes attended by poor children from proper oversight and support, they are likely to be constitutionally impermissible because:

- They will be in violation of section 28(2) of the Constitution that holds that, 'A child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child.'

- Any law, policy or development plan must prioritise the most marginalised and place considerable weight on the best interests of children (Government of the Republic of South Africa and Others v Grootboom and Others [2000] ZACC 19).
- The state must legislate in a manner that ensures the safety and protection of children.
- The state must legislate and act in a manner that ensures the dignity of the child and promotes equality. These are preeminent values in the Constitution, and a child's early development is integral to their equality and dignity.
- The state must legislate in a manner that considers the child's 'precise real-life situation' (S v M [2007] ZACC 18 para 24).

The case for registering and funding all types of home-based ECD programmes –

In a nutshell...

- In order to ensure the best interests of the child, government funding strategies must focus on reaching children not on reaching certain types of ECD programmes.
- The government needs to reach poor children where they are – and constraints in many urban and rural areas mean that many families rely on home-based ECD programmes.
- Today's children cannot wait – and the most practical, cost-effective way of ensuring that they can access early learning opportunities, is through the rapid scale-up of ECD programmes that use existing premises.
- Research shows that quality early learning opportunities do not depend on the setting and can be delivered in all types of ECD programmes.
- Home-based ECD programmes create employment and enable micro enterprise in the poorest communities.
- Home-based ECD programmes contribute to equal economic opportunities for women.
- Government policy requires and commits to a mixed model of ECD provision.

- All home-based ECD programmes, of all sizes, are registrable and fundable by provincial DSDs under the Children’s Act – the types of premises per se are not relevant.
- The Children’s Act makes provision for only the registration function to be delegated to municipalities, not the funding function – and then only when strict conditions are met.
- The Constitution provides a powerful basis for the imperative to register and fund all types of home-based ECD programmes.

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13 ‘I Love the Feeling of Keeping Them Safe’ – Men as Early Childhood Development Practitioners

Wessel van den Berg and Kwanda Ndoda

“I’m the one that’s struggling here, not her.” This was a father’s response to my umpteenth reassurance that his daughter was okay in her new playgroup. At that moment she was happily arranging mud cakes on a log under the plum tree. I realised later he was observing me to be sure that his daughter really was okay and safe with me as a male playgroup teacher. In the light of the extreme violence towards women and children in South Africa, it was hard to argue with him.

Where you place your child for care and early learning is one of the most important decisions a parent can make. The people and places that surround a young child influence their cognitive and emotional development for life. This is also likely to be the first social space that a child encounters without a parent, and it will shape the child’s engagement with most social institutions in the future, including school, tertiary education and even the workplace.

We are all overwhelmed with reports of men’s violence, but if we are to stop the vicious cycles of violence and neglect, young children must be exposed to safe, caring and trustworthy men. This will reduce the likelihood of boys becoming perpetrators and girls being socialised to unconsciously accept men’s violence. But where do we find such men?

A few men in positions of care shared their stories with Kwanda Ndoda, Innovation

Manager at the DG Murray Trust. Interviews were conducted with men associated with SmartStart, an early learning social franchise with a network of trained and licensed practitioners (SmartStarters) and with Toy Librarians working with the Ntataise Lowveld Trust. Toy Librarians play with children, fix broken educational toys and avail toys to playgroups and early childhood development (ECD) centres. Their stories offer hope and point to two ways to promote a healthy society. Enhancing gender equality in the workforce is a crucial first step: when men are involved in caregiving professions, it counters the notion that care work is only for women. Next, we need to promote the intergenerational transfer of caring behaviour.

Recent evidence shows that men have increased oxytocin (the so-called ‘caring’ hormone) levels when involved in childcare. Spending time caring for children creates a biological feedback that enables men to be better carers of children as evidenced by one of the interviewees, Senzo, who says: “Working here helped me a lot. I can control my temper and my anger.”

Barriers to engaging men in ECD

Despite the sound individual and societal reasons for involving men in ECD, there are significant barriers to overcome. It is still unusual for men to be doing what is seen as ‘women’s work’. Senzo recalls: “My friends said: ‘You’re crazy to work with children! What do you think you’re doing?’”

Another hurdle is the risk of violence. Preventing teachers (of both sexes) using violence against children requires careful and effective vetting, and specific training and monitoring. Good practice includes a clear code of conduct, having more than one adult present with children at all times, and encouraging a culture where children feel safe to talk about their experiences, with adults taking children’s reports seriously enough to act.

Changing norms

Encouraging more men to become active in ECD requires a systematically

implemented and monitored approach. Balungile (an ECD practitioner interviewed by Ndoda) appreciated the fact that SmartStart did not recruit for 'day mothers' but for carers. Some of his parents were not apprehensive in leaving their children with a male carer. In fact, when they arrived with their children, none of them seemed apprehensive; they came, paid and dropped off the children. Balungile said they feel they are leaving the child with the 'day father'.

Toy libraries are a good place to get men started, as another interviewee, Bonga, mentioned: "Mainly for men it's the best way to start. You get to engage children in a playful manner. Men typically gravitate to playing with children; working with toys and play presents an opportunity that may be more appealing to men than starting in a more formal educational role."

It's important to acknowledge that adults' engagement with children can be gender biased. A structured gender socialisation programme will allow teachers to better understand gender and socialisation, and acquire a more progressive stance. Balungile recalls: "...My child's mother had to return to work. It was tough... I would ask women in the neighbourhood to help me change nappies, but as time went on, I decided this was something I could do myself."

Some men also help to normalise men's care work in the surrounding community, as indicated by Bonga: "We can break this barrier of men not being trusted, especially with the young guys who are the fathers of tomorrow. Whenever we have a 'Come and Play' session or a parents' meeting, it saddens me when I see that you will find maybe one or two males there, but it's a start... It teaches other males... They want to know what we are doing, how are we doing it."

“ The work of investing in ways to get men more engaged in the care of children extends beyond the household, and can be achieved in institutional settings by deliberately focusing on recruiting men as ECD practitioners. ”

Most of the men spoke about the valuable role they play in a society where fathers are not involved enough in children's lives. Pastor George, aka 'Papa G', said: "The

reason I like to work with children is that I grew up without a father. I know first-hand that as a boy when you grow up without a father you miss the things that the father could've taught you.”

‘I love the feeling of keeping them safe’

The work of investing in ways to get men more engaged in the care of children extends beyond the household, and can be achieved in institutional settings by deliberately focusing on recruiting men as ECD practitioners. In the context of grotesque violence perpetrated by men against women and children, these men strike a powerful contrast in their earnestness to protect children. Says Philani: “I love the feeling of keeping them safe. They are safe in front of me. I am responsible for shaping these children, so that they can live good lives.”

The global evidence shows that short-term interventions to shift cultures of patriarchy have little effect, because gender norms are already fixed by early adolescence. Embedding gender-transformative norms requires a prolonged inter-generational project, aimed at shaping new identities for young children and teenagers (Kågesten et al., 2016). The presence of male ECD practitioners therefore not only has the power to shape the lives of the children in their care, it has the potential to reshape subsequent generations – and their attitudes to the roles and traits that men can possess. As more men enter into the ECD space, the greater chance we have of making it normal for men to be carers, protectors and promoters of gender equality.

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14 Women of Strength

Thembisa Nkohla

I first began my journey into early childhood development (ECD), when I started working for the Centre for Early Childhood Development. At the time I knew nothing about ECD. To me, I saw ECD as a baby-sitting service, where women looked after children (most people have this mentality as well), and where children just ate, slept and ran around. When I started to work in the field; working directly with ECD centre principals and practitioners, my perception changed. My passion grew as I read books and attended different training workshops so that I could expand my knowledge. I came to realise that children learn through play, and that early education is vital in a child's life; it's the foundation for the child's future.

During my time, I have met different people, young and old, especially women working in the field of early childhood development. They have been in the field longer than I have, they are very humble, passionate, down-to-earth and have a willingness to learn new things so that they can improve the lives of the young children in their community where they operate their ECD centres from. They are hard-working people and they make sacrifices in looking after other people's children and instilling good values in them. It is clear that they want these children to become something in the future. By doing this, each child will make a difference in their homes, as they come from different backgrounds and their home situations are always different. But at the ECD centres they are all treated the same.

Sometimes you will find principals that will tell you straight that they have been doing this before you were even born. What has shocked me is that most of them are not earning a salary and if they do get a salary it's not adequate enough for the long hours and the working conditions they work under. But the love they have for those children is amazing, and I salute them.

One principal in particular has stood out from the rest. Elizabeth Makhapela runs an ECD centre in Philippi East/Lower Crossroads. She previously worked in another ECD centre, as a teacher. She had no ECD qualifications but she was given an opportunity to work at this centre as she was unemployed and looking for employment (in order to meet her responsibilities as a mother and a wife). She worked in that ECD centre for years. When she left, she started her own ECD centre with nothing but the knowledge of how to look after children. She operated her ECD centre in her own RDP house, which was so small; a house with just one room. The house also functioned as her family's house, where they all stayed. Parents in the community started to notice that there was a crèche close to their homes. She started looking after just two children, but parents in the community started to notice the crèche as it was close to their homes, and so the number of children enrolled increased and Elizabeth started using the shack in her yard. As the centre grew, Elizabeth started attending workshops and training to expand her knowledge in ECD. She enrolled herself to do her Level 4 Further Education and Training Certificate in ECD with the College of Cape Town. While busy with her qualification she also started to work more systematically at the ECD centre, starting with enquiring about registering her ECD centre with the relevant government departments. Elizabeth had support from The Centre for Early Childhood Development; through funded ECD intervention programmes which included financial support as well as mentoring and on-site support.

What is so inspiring about Elizabeth is that she is always willing to learn, implement what she has learnt and always very open to share information with other principals that are starting their own ECD centres. She has always wanted to show me or share with me every change of furniture she bought for her ECD centre; with such enthusiasm. She will tell people that she is uneducated, but to me any lack of previous education didn't stop her from doing things or stop the progress she made at her ECD centre; which now is a registered Non-profit organisation (NPO), with

active governing body members who are always willing and available to assist the principal and her staff. The governing body, principal, staff and parents start each year with a fundraising plan. With the funds they have raised they started to extend the RDP house by building a toilet facility, and separate kitchen for the ECD centre, in order for the site to meet the norms and standards required for registration. Elizabeth also saves some money, from the little salary she gets at the end of the month, if there is money left over after paying the teachers' salaries, purchasing groceries, electricity and other essentials for the ECD centre. When Elizabeth received her registration certificate from the Department of Social Development (DSD) showing that her ECD centre was registered as a partial care facility, she was over the moon with excitement. For a principal to receive a registration certificate from DSD really is an achievement, as the registration process is a challenge and a stressful process. Elizabeth went on to apply for the per capita ECD subsidy from the department and now her ECD centre receives funding from DSD.

Elizabeth continues with her education and has now completed her Level 4 Further Education Training Certificate in ECD and has enrolled for her Level 5 Higher Certificate in ECD at the same college. She has expanded her business and opened another ECD centre in the Eastern Cape, in her home town. She says that the reason behind the second centre is that she wants to improve the standard of ECD in her home town. She sees the importance of developing young children at an early age.

Elizabeth and I have walked this journey together through hardship and difficult times. Sometimes we will disagree on things, but in the end, we will always come to an understanding. It is clear that for both of us, following your dream and reaching it is a challenge, as you have to focus.

The women in ECD centres are really women of strength; they are so dedicated and loyal to the children in their ECD centres. Sometimes principals go through personal problems at home, but they come to their centres and they smile as if everything is okay. They are not thinking about themselves, they more concerned about the wellbeing of the children and staff. Even during financial crises, they will still find a way to come out from that situation. I'm really proud to be part of the ECD sector and grateful to be working with women that are contributing all they can to society.

15 My Journey to Ensure All Children are Included

Colleen Horswell-Daniels

My journey into the ECD realm started in July 1976, when I gave birth to my eldest son, whose father was a black American, during the Apartheid years. As we were the only coloured family in a dominant white family, I was told not to bring my child to our weekly visits to my grandparents' home. My father supported me and said no one will visit the family. I got involved in his crèche serving as a board member, but the bug of ECD had not quite bitten me. In 1984 I gave birth to my second son who was diagnosed with Downs Syndrome. At birth he was kept in the nursery with no explanation and overhearing a conversation between the nurses I demanded to know what the problem was. I was asked to wait in the lounge where the sister came and asked me: "Do you know what a mongel is?" I had an idea and said yes, her next words were "Well you gave birth to one. Go home, forget you gave birth to this child, as he will amount to nothing... put him in a home."

I don't think they were quite prepared for my next move, I went into the nursery where I noted a nurse about to tube feed him. She put the milk into a syringe and with one thrust he was fed. I demanded to take him to the ward and was told because he has a tube down his nose into his stomach that it is not allowed. I said that this was my child. I would take him and feed him. This started my journey of always having to fight for his rights. I slowly started feeding him via the tube as if he was latching onto my breast and I sat and massaged his muscles to start latching on to my breast as they said we could go home once he started doing this. I was

determined to leave the hospital soon and so began the journey of nurturing my new born son.

During the 3rd month I realised the onerous task that lay ahead of me. This child was dependent on me for his life. He slept and had to be coaxed to wake up for feeds and so I learnt many ways to wake and stimulate him; mostly through trial and error. I also started reading, researching, and making enquiries as to where he could attend early education. I approached the D S centre in Bellville and was told children of colour could attend one morning a week, a play group. There and then I set the wheels in motion to start an ECD site for him. I got hold of two other mothers and for a year we planned, found premises and staff, and opened Peter Pan Downs Syndrome Centre, with only three children attending.

We persevered and Cape Mental Health Society approached us with a suggestion; there was a social worker from Germany who had worked on a similar project of inclusive education in Germany and wanted to come and assist us. My prayer was answered as many said my idea of inclusivity would never work. This was the start of the growth of Peter Pan. After overcoming the stigma attached to special needs children, parents brought their children to the ECD site and soon we were operating as a fully inclusive ECD site. Today they are still operating in Woodstock, and the special needs teacher I employed 32 years ago is now the principal of Peter Pan, and the school is linked to the Western Cape Education Department.

I relocated to another area and had two more boys added to my family. My last born was diagnosed with ADHD and cognitive delay functioning abilities. Daily, I made this trip from Grassy Park, travelling via a taxi, then on a train, then a taxi, to the ECD centre, to drop children off and then to work and again back in the evening. This, with two children under 2 years old. Eventually it became too much, and I got a live-in helper only to find out I had subjected my children to someone who took my children, now aged two years and three years, for walks from Grassy Park to Retreat over highways and dense bush and back home again. One night I came home to a heap of dirt in my lounge and this lady locked in her room. I took her to the clinic the next morning only to discover she was schizophrenic and was not taking medication. The doctor advised that my children's lives would have been in great danger had I not brought her in. Immediately I had to send her home. Next

came a helper from the church who left my three children alone in the house from 7am when I left for work. When my eldest came home from school he found the three children traumatized and crying. My dad rushed to fetch them and said this was it! He saw a creche site in the area that they lived in, bought it and asked me to give up my job and come run the ECD centre (known as Gerard's Educare Centre).

This was the start of my real ECD journey. I had another fight on my hands to establish an inclusive school, while dealing with insults from parents: "Ek sal nie my kinders sit by mal kinders nie"; "Lock your children up and throw away the keys" was said to me. There were many other similar situations, but I believed in my dream and vision that all children had a right to education. Whilst Peter Pan thrived in town, Gerard's Educare Centre took a while to develop, but perseverance and hard work with an excellent team, set us upwards. We introduced farm animals to the children, ponies, lambs, geese and chickens, and this was very therapeutic for the children, especially the children with special needs, who enjoyed brushing the ponies, fetching eggs from the chickens and a big fat whopper of an egg from the geese. We were very fortunate in that the University of the Western Cape had heard about our ECD site and on a regular basis we had various graduates in speech therapy, OT, medicine, and special needs doing research work at our centre. They offered valuable guidance with stimulating children across the spectrum.

We also had many success stories, of children who had been exposed to children with barriers, with feedback from parents always being positive as to how it impacted their lives and how much empathy they now have when seeing someone with special needs, as well as success combating prejudice when our children were ridiculed by others. I remember a young lad from Mauritius who came to my centre, not able to walk or do anything for himself. An incredibly determined father, and a speech and occupational therapist worked with the lad and my staff, and as a team he eventually was able to walk out of my ECD site. The joy on his father's face is still etched in my mind. Eventually they returned to Mauritius. There are many more success stories. We have had special needs learners who attended inclusive schools (very few) and they are progressing very well. The reports that we receive from parents are just the best.

At this stage I enrolled to do my ECD Level 4 training and met some amazing

people along the journey. I also met my mentor and looked to him for guidance in many decisions I made. I got involved with Francesco Johnson of WCED ECD and attended many meetings with various departments, talking about the same ECD challenges.

In 2021, we are still talking about the same things. And so, the struggle in the ECD realm continues with new role-players, constantly. Unless we have political will behind ECD, we will fail our children. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown this, along with the reality of the marginalised children in our poor communities. Government is like an ostrich, with its head in the sand, not budging.

Whilst all this was happening, I was also going through a rocky marriage, with my husband who had succumbed to substance abuse and life was very erratic. However, I kept this to myself as I did not want people to judge him. He was not a bad person, probably just not able to deal with the challenges life dealt him and he needed a crutch. Those who have not been in such a relationship always question: “Why did she not leave him?” or “Why was she staying in this harmful relationship?”. I think I always gave people the benefit of the doubt in terms of the good I saw in them and believed they could change.

On another note, things started falling apart when my dad died, and the family decided to sell the property. I tried to buy the property, but as I was married in community of property and my husband was blacklisted, that put paid to the idea.

I relocated and rented the building from the new owners, but the cost was so high I could not survive and sat my boys down. I told them we must convert the lounge and garage into a crèche, and they would have to share a room. They were supportive and so the next phase started.

All through these challenges I was dealing with my husband and many life challenges, but as a family we pulled through. Despite several attempts to rehabilitate, it did not work, and life became a see-saw, juggling establishing the ECD site at home, ensuring that my children attended school and meeting the payment of bills. It was not an easy journey with the community, as my son, Robert, was often abused by people who did not understand his behaviour. He had boiling water thrown at him,

he was beaten with a belt until welts covered his body, and was chased away with comments such as: “Your mother should lock you up and throw away the key.” My mission was to educate communities that every child has the right to be present in the community they live in, and often I made pamphlets on Downs Syndrome and ADHD to ensure people understood who these children are.

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Eventually I was able to take a second bond to build a separate entrance on the property. We battled to keep the numbers up as people were still not ready to accept the idea of inclusivity in the area we moved to. Once again, I began a battle to survive and keep afloat. I took a part-time job facilitating ECD learnerships at TVET colleges over weekends to ensure an extra income to pay the bills. Soon I was asked to facilitate ECD training during the week as well, and as I had a strong team, my days extended to facilitating for three days a week, which I enjoyed. I enjoyed preparing these women to become quality ECD teachers using my experience, skills and knowledge I had learnt over the years. I also became a qualified Assessor, Moderator and I did a Skills Development Facilitator course, as well as other ECD workshops on special needs children. I never knew my passion was so ingrained and soon I earned a reputation as one of the best facilitators, who took her students to heart and invested time in their wellbeing. Besides educating, I became their mentor, mother, counsellor, and they knew they could phone me any hour of the night to speak when life got too much for them. I had so many students who were going through many issues such as abuse, rape, identity crises and a range of issues, and through my life experiences they found a trusted source of support. Up until today, they are still a part of my life and they regularly phone to share their success stories.

When your home is about to be auctioned and you beg the bank to give you a chance, that is God’s grace and I survived through his grace. Eventually I also reached the realisation that you cannot always hope things will get better when someone is battling a problem; the time to release my children’s father was on the table. It was not easy for my special needs sons as they were attached to their dad,

when he did surface at home. This was a tough period of adjusting to the fact that he was gone.

Eventually the break came when we won the BEST ECD CENTRE in South Africa award in 2013. With this, the demand by parents to have their children at Gerard's Educare Centre grew and for the first time in 25 years I learnt what it is to say, "I regret we are full and can place you on a waiting list".

At the same time the City of Cape Town built an ECD centre in the area and this went out to tender. I was awarded the tender and had a three-year plan to reach a target of 200 children for which the centre was registered. Within two months of operating we were full and have had a waiting list every year since.

With this development came a new mindset, as I had always looked at the ECD centre as a place of learning and not as a business. Many people guided me in the correct decisions I had to make and here I crossed paths again with an amazing man, who guided me towards using the SAGE package which he had donated to our ECD centre.

During COVID-19 the many challenges of ECD surfaced and I am continually active in a C19 civil society group taking up the task of ECD in SA. Many ECD groups were formed and daily new contacts are made throughout South Africa. The challenges are real and the suffering of our children in poor communities is real.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many ECD centres, and thousands of women have lost their jobs. ECD centres have closed and at my ECD centre, due to stringent COVID-19 regulations, we had to retrench 15 staff members as we could not take the full number of children back. This is an incredibly sad time for me, as my staff are loyal, hardworking and dedicated to the vision of Gerard's Educare centre.

I have realised that when you have a passion and stand for what you believe in, many people will feel intimidated or threatened by your persona, and sometimes it can be lonely, as well as painful for many reasons. But my philosophy has always been: I will stand tall for every injustice I see when it comes to a child, to ALL children.

16 Don't Just Read to Your Children, Talk to Them too

David Jeffery

Any education expert will tell you that a child's home environment is critical to shaping their future - well before they even enter school.

By a child's fourth birthday, their future aggression levels can be predicted by the quality of their relationship with their parents and the extent to which they have learned to control their emotions. By age six, a child's language development and ability to focus their attention predict their later school performance and future employment prospects.

Parents have long been told that reading to their child is an essential facet of good parenting. A bedtime story can help to immerse a child in language and build those essential caregiver bonds.

Reading is promoted particularly to low-income families to bridge the "word gap". Researchers have found that not only do the number of words toddlers hear from their family predict future school achievement, but also that, by their third birthday, children from poor families have heard on average 30-million fewer words than children from middle-class families. In South Africa, there has been a strong focus on reading to your child.

But research published in recent months suggests that reading might not be

enough, especially for preschool children. The Lena Research Foundation found that, rather than the number of words heard by the child, it is actually the nature of the conversational exchange between parents and their child that really matters (Gilkerson et al, 2018). What seems to be most important for child language development is the extent to which parents and children take turns when speaking (or even babbling) to each other. Children who were more engaged in this kind of conversational turn-taking between birth and age three were more likely to enjoy advanced school performance and language ability a decade later (ibid). In fact, once the number of “conversational turns” had been accounted for, the effect of the number of words heard on children’s later academic performance was relatively weak.

The importance of conversational turns was supported by findings from a second study, also published in 2018, by researchers at Harvard University. They used brain scanning technology to examine children’s brain activity while either being read to or engaging in conversation. They found that the parts of the brain associated with language development were particularly activated during conversational turns and that it was this activation that best predicted child language learning (Romeo et al, 2018).

An important conclusion that we can draw from these two studies is that simply reading a book to a child has the limitation of involving few, if any, conversational turns.

We need a subtle but powerful shift in focus in our approach to language development in very young children. Book-sharing offers this shift.

Book-sharing is a technique for engaging children in the exploration of wordless picture books while gently questioning and supporting them in a two-way verbal exchange. Parents can be shown how to lead a child through a story using questions such as “What is happening here?”, “What do you think will happen next?” or “How do you think she feels right now?”

Although any picture book could facilitate this type of interaction, wordless picture books are uniquely well suited for supporting child development because they require parents and children to discuss the pictures to make sense of the story.

They are also fun and effective, especially if parents are not comfortable with reading words themselves.

This sharing activity has long been recognised in international literature as being extremely beneficial for young children. In 2014, Stellenbosch University evaluated a book-sharing programme with parents of one- to two-year-old children in Khayelitsha in Cape Town. This programme showed enormous gains for child language and cognitive development (Vally, Murray, Tomlinson & Cooper, 2014). This was supported by a second study with older children in 2017-18 (Dowdall et al, in press).

Remarkably, these gains were achieved irrespective of the levels of poverty or education in the families. The World Health Organisation has subsequently endorsed this programme.

This does not mean that you shouldn't read to your child. Reading to children is an activity they enjoy and one that is enormously helpful for widening their experience and understanding; and it is an activity that parents should continue for as long as their children enjoy being read to. But the recent research suggests that, with preschool children, a book-sharing approach that maximises conversational turns is especially beneficial to their development.

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17 Invest in Children to Boost South Africa's Recovery

Patricia Martin

South Africa has committed to achieving inclusive, rights-based, sustainable development. To do this, it must unlock the potential of its most significant asset - the human capital that resides in its children.

What do we mean by sustainable, inclusive rights-based development and who is responsible?

It is defined by the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals that, if achieved, will secure a shared vision for the future. That vision is one of peaceful, safe, economically stable, and prosperous societies where every person is a socially, economically and politically active citizen.

How are we doing?

Not very well. Poverty and inequality levels are persistently high. Unemployment was high before COVID-19 but has since increased. Violence, especially against women and children, has reached epidemic proportions. Governance is weak, especially at local levels. Our democracy is under threat because of corruption, limited accountability to the electorate, and social unrest.

What will it take to change this situation effectively and permanently?

We can only achieve lasting change if every child in South Africa develops to their full potential to:

- become economically active and pay taxes;
- be politically active through peaceful, democratic processes;
- become ethical, visionary leaders;
- become good governors and administrators of our precious national resources;
- become responsible citizens that respect the rights of others to be safe and free from discrimination; and
- become good parents who provide nurturing care to their children.

This can only be achieved if South Africa adopts transformative, child-centred governance that brings about a permanent change, by developing the capacities and competencies of its children to be agents of sustainable development.

The solution is complex, long-term and multigenerational. We must direct our collective national resources to build strong human capital foundations.

Permanent and lasting change requires that this, and future generations of children, are nurtured to be effective political leaders, responsible and caring citizens, responsive and nurturing parents, effective governors and administrators, and active employers and employees.

Who is responsible for developing the skills and knowledge children need to take up their role as custodians of sustainable development?

The primary duty bearers are parents and the education system. Both, however, are ill-equipped to fulfil their roles and develop 21st century citizens.

The evidence is overwhelming: unlocking human capital depends on every child, especially the most marginalised, receiving nurturing, responsive caregiving from

conception until they become adults themselves.

The care children receive, especially in the early years, affects the growth and development of their bodies and brains, and ultimately their social, emotional and cognitive potential to become agents of sustainable development.

The evidence is so compelling as to have convinced the World Health Organisation and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), which have co-developed two planning frameworks – the Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development (which can be viewed at www.nurturing-care.org) and the Inspire framework for ending violence against children (which can be viewed at https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/inspire/INSPIRE_ExecutiveSummary_EN.pdf) – to guide governments on harnessing the available evidence to develop transformational policies and programmes to build human capital for sustainable development.

Central to both documents is the provision of support and services to enable responsive and nurturing care by parents and other caregivers.

Parents lay the early foundations for their children by ensuring, for example, their children are immunised, well-nourished, have received appropriate stimulation and early learning from birth, and have benefited from positive parenting and not been exposed to harsh discipline.

Once these building blocks are in place, the education system can further their potential by providing quality, 21st century transformative education to ensure that every child acquires the knowledge and competencies they need in order to be agents of sustainable development.

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At present, many parents and families lack the power to provide nurturing care. Multiple risks and adversities – amplified during COVID-19 – make it almost impossible for families to provide nurturing, responsive care.

Equally so, schools are not providing the required 21st century education, which prepares children to take up their diverse roles in all aspects of 21st century society; the type of education that provides them with the facts and knowledge, skills and competencies they need to be active citizens, employers, taxpayers, parents, leaders and governors.

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Achieving sustainable development, peace and good governance now, more than ever, requires a strong national system of family support, complemented by transformative quality education.

Our national system of family support needs to ensure that:

- Every parent knows that the parenting they provide is directly linked to how their children’s bodies and brains will grow, whether they do well at school, whether they will have a job, whether they will be violent, or whether they will be nurturing caregivers themselves;
- That every parent and caregiver knows how to provide nurturing, responsive care. For example, that they know and understand how to provide developmentally supportive food and nutritional practices to avoid stunting; how to monitor development milestones and what to do if children are seen not to be on track; how to stimulate the cognitive development of babies and young children from birth and how to support older children once at school; how to follow positive parenting that affirms and builds children’s knowledge and self-confidence; and to avoid the use of harsh discipline and violence because it harms children’s cognitive and social development; and

- That the risks preventing the provision of nurturing care are addressed through an appropriate package of family support. Generally, public family support programmes take the limited form of social security by way of cash grants to overcome one of the biggest risks to providing nurturing care; poverty.

But financial support alone is not enough. To address the multiple and intersecting impediments to providing nurturing care, families, parents and caregivers need a package of support that includes education on child development and nurturing care, workplace support for caregivers such as maternity leave and support for breast feeding; psychosocial support; positive parenting skills; access to employment opportunities; and material support for children with additional needs, such as devices for children with disabilities.

The content and focus of the package must respond to local contextual risks and opportunities.

Making nurturing care universal and ensuring optimal returns on our family support investments requires a 21st century education system that contributes to building a population of parents with the knowledge and skills needed to provide nurturing, responsive care. This requires a transformative curriculum that not only makes coding and robotics compulsory; that not only focuses on preparing children to be economically active.

To be truly transformative, schools must provide compulsory, examinable courses in child development, responsive parenting; civic and political responsibilities and rights; and focus on the critical skills needed for effective leadership and governance of the country.

Let us get real. At a stretch, only a small number of children will use their robotics and coding education. Every child, however, needs, and will make use of child development, parenting, and civic education.

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Our education system is not equipped to meet this demand and the associated sustainable development imperative.

Providing effective, population-scale family support and 21st century transformative education is a non-negotiable if we are to have any chance of eradicating violence, poverty, and inequality.

To secure the required package of support across the child's life course requires a coordinated, whole-of-society response. This in turn requires strong, national, visionary leadership by the president and his executive, as well as by civil society and business that will ensure state-wide recognition and the long-term commitment required to realise this developmental imperative.

But leadership alone is not enough. We need effective and strategic government-wide management by the relevant ministries and departments such as social development, health and education of public resources to translate the commitment into effective, long-term, quality interventions rather than yet another round of campaigns, posters, and events.

This timely collection of thought-provoking essays, compiled and edited by a South African early childhood development team, led by Associate Professor Eric Atmore, explores the concerns, opinions, and calls-for-action of thought leaders in the ECD sector in South Africa.

Contributors include experienced ECD activists, academics, young emerging ECD leaders, researchers, ECD centre principals and teachers, non-profit leaders, and ECD programme managers, resulting in a collection of perspectives and insights that will engage readers who are interested in understanding the current state of ECD in South Africa.

Readers can dip into this collection and take something of value out each time.

This volume explores a number of crucial areas in ECD in South Africa, including:

- The effects of COVID-19 on the ECD sector
- The significant inequality present in the ECD field in South Africa
- The power of play in early learning
- The importance of perseverance in spite of the obstacles faced in offering quality ECD programmes in the country
- The importance of supporting ECD principals and teachers amidst their challenges
- The role and importance of ECD forums in South Africa
- How to holistically develop children to become economically active and productive as adults
- How men can and should become more involved in the professional ECD sector
- The importance of supporting and developing home-based ECD programmes
- Government's ECD policies and solutions to improve implementation.

This book has been produced at a time when South Africa is at a crossroads. With the foundation of early education, care and nutrition at risk, the future of young children in this country is in the balance. Well-planned and decisive action is urgently required by government, the NPO sector, ECD programme providers, training organisations, donors, communities, and families – the future of South Africa's economy demands it.

“ At last! A tour-de force of voices, passion, and scholarship not only for the criticality of Early Childhood Development, but for what we owe our children. Their right to learn, play, and opportunity are the only measures of a loving, compassionate society. A must-read for all of us, who were once children!”

- Professor Nuraan Davids,
University of Stellenbosch