



planning, monitoring
& evaluation

Department:
Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



PSPPD

PROGRAMME TO
SUPPORT PRO-POOR
POLICY DEVELOPMENT

POLICY BRIEF SERIES

THEME 3: Child poverty (early childhood development, children and violence)



Early childhood education: Building capacity to ensure quality provision

BACKGROUND

Early childhood development (ECD) is vital in ensuring the optimal growth, development and well-being of young children. The importance of good ECD is now recognised by the South African government and ECD implementation has become a priority focus. However, gains in children's development and learning will remain minimal unless the ECD provision is of sound quality.

Within the South African context, the legacy of apartheid is a widespread lack of understanding of the importance of appropriate quality early care and stimulation if children are to engage with the demands of formal schooling and grow into socially responsive and responsible citizens. This lack of understanding has had profound consequences for ECD provision. Essential funding has not been forthcoming and most of the country's children still do not have access to ECD or, where they do, the quality of provision is often poor.

There are many barriers to the implementation of quality services for young children, usually the result of a lack of capacity (human and material) in the sector. There is a shortage of adequately qualified ECD practitioners, centres are often overcrowded, material resources are stretched, infrastructure is poor, and the registration of ECD centres is problematic. This is especially true in the case of children who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or suffer from disability.

Capacity-building across the sector should become the primary focus of future ECD policy options to ensure effective roll-out of services. It is only through the sustained provision of quality ECD that we will be able to meet the aims of the ECD National Policy (DSD, 2014) and offer all South Africa's children fair, just and equitable early childhood experiences.

FINDINGS

What have we achieved?

Despite the gaps in quality ECD, research shows that much has been achieved over the last 15 years. A small but solid ECD research base has been established and we have reliable knowledge about the current state and competencies of the ECD sector. The National Integrated Plan for ECD (NIP ECD) 2005-2010 offers a comprehensive ECD package, especially for children from birth to four years, and roles have been clarified for various government departments, with the Department of Social Development (DSD) as the lead organisation for ECD provision. It is acknowledged that ECD services ought to be delivered through different programme types (for example, home and community-based services and parent programmes) and should not only be centre-based or site-based.

The White Paper on Families (2011) commits the state to family strengthening programmes, and the National ECD Policy and Programme (2014) outlines a comprehensive quality ECD programme and a non-negotiable essential package for ECD respectively. The Department of Basic Education (DBE), which is tasked with ECD curriculum implementation, has also made progress, with the National Early Learning Development Standards (NELDS) (2009) and National Curriculum Framework (2015) having been published.

We know WHAT to do. The big question is HOW do we implement quality ECD for all?

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

Selected policy options to build capacity in ECD

Given the complexities of this sector and the different cultural and other contexts, there is no single best way to implement ECD provision and to build capacity. We should therefore draw on existing strengths and tailor these strengths to build capacity.

We have to consider an 'and/both' approach rather than opt for one single 'either/or' approach to ECD.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognise and harness existing strengths in ECD

There is strong support from civil society for ECD. Reputable ECD non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been responsible for much of the capacity-building in the sector. Their expertise should be harnessed and strengthened and their existing programmes extended. In addition, NGOs should be supported to introduce new home-, community- or centre-based quality programmes.



There are good examples of sustainable home- and community-based programmes that could be expanded with greater support and funding.

With the growing number of ECD researchers, both in higher education institutions (HEIs) and in the NGO sector, this expertise can be used to ensure that capacity-building projects contain a rigorous research element with a focus on monitoring and evaluation (M&E). An action research model which could measure the impact of the capacity-building programme and influence practice should be adopted. This approach is in line with the recent announcement by the Department of Higher Education and Training about the strengthening of ECD practitioner/teacher qualifications through the introduction of a B.Ed degree in Early Childhood Care and Education.



2. Develop human and material capacity

Current research points to the importance of increasing the knowledge and skills base of various stakeholders in the sector. Adults/ caregivers/ teachers/practitioners require comprehensive support in order to improve the delivery of existing programmes, whether home-, community- or centre-based. One option could be mentoring programmes and the identification of clusters of excellence which could assist other ECD caregivers/practitioners to become more effective. Such capacity-building programmes could be improved by drawing on the collective strengths of reputable ECD NGOs and HEIs. Programmes could have both an urban and a rural focus. The ECD organisations should have community buy-in and be supported to assist less experienced ECD caregivers/practitioners to improve. Particular emphasis should be given to helping ECD caregivers/practitioners offer meaningful play-based teaching and learning opportunities to children. Such an approach would involve training, improving resources and infrastructure, as well as strengthening teaching and learning methodologies where appropriate.

In addition, ECD caregivers should be encouraged to think about what constitutes quality ECD in their contexts and through a process of self-reflection, could be supported to improve their own expertise. In this way, relevant indigenous knowledge and cultural practices become recognised as important components of play-based teaching and learning.

Such a capacity-building programme should start slowly and spread out as competence is developed through mentoring programmes and centres of excellence. One result would be to offer improved services to vulnerable and disabled children. As caregivers deepen their insights into learning and teaching in ECD, they will develop a better understanding of ways to accommodate vulnerable children and children with disabilities in ECD.

Similar mentoring programmes could be offered to parents through collaborative partnerships with ECD sites which meet appropriate standards. Selected sites could, for example, hold afternoon playgroup sessions where parents receive input on aspects of appropriate child care and stimulation. In return for extending ECD services to the community, the ECD centre would receive some remuneration which could be ploughed back into the centre to improve infrastructure and resources. The child grant (or part of it) could also, for example, be made conditional on parents/caregivers taking part in practices to benefit their child's wellbeing. Organisations which support such engagements and deliver enabling services could receive a subsidy which could be used to improve infrastructure or resources. Encouraging parents to become accountable for their children's wellbeing appears to be an accepted practice in a number of countries, such as Chile, Peru and Mexico.

A clustering/ mentor type model is a medium- to long-term strategy. There is no quick fix as the focus of the capacity-building has to be on changing the mindset of caregivers about how to communicate with and teach young children. Collaboration between government departments and with the NGO sector and HEIs should underpin all selected capacity-building programmes.

Adults working with young children have to be offered teaching and learning strategies that best support optimal learning and development in young children.

3. Increasing the provision of ECD, including improved access for disadvantaged, vulnerable and disabled children

Research points to the need to increase access to ECD for all children, as most, especially those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or have disabilities, have no or little access to any ECD service. However, warnings from other studies should be heeded, and not the roll-out of services should not be increased until the challenges of building capacity and improving quality can be addressed. These studies show, especially in relation to Grade R, that increasing access before effective service provision can be guaranteed has been detrimental to children's learning and development, especially for the more disadvantaged in the community.

Government must first address the challenges in relation to human and material resource capacity and infrastructure. Only once these challenges are being adequately addressed, should services be extended and access to ECD increased.



CONCLUSION

Research has identified many challenges in providing quality ECD to all children. There is no single quick fix. Quality ECD provision will require changing understandings about how young children grow, develop and learn, and about how to ensure they reach their optimal potential and benefit from all learning opportunities.

This policy brief therefore supports a medium- to long-term option: start small and build capacity in human and material resources, and identify reputable ECD organisations and practitioners/teachers/sites who can partner government in this. Through community buy-in, select participants who want to improve their competencies to join the project, and as the capacity of these participants improves, extend the project. Invite them to support new participants who want to improve their practices. Such capacity-building projects will take time to show results. However, through the research component which could be built into each project, the outcomes can be closely monitored. The success of these types of projects depends on community support and involvement. Accountability for quality ECD therefore becomes the concern and responsibility of all individuals in the community who are involved in the sector.

Find the full report "Early Childhood Development in South Africa: A systematic review of salient research from 2000 to 2015" with links to the full reference list on the PSPPD website (www.pspdd.org) and in the PSPPD II Poverty and Inequality Knowledge Repository (<http://psppdknowledgepository.org/>).



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