

Mapping of Earning Pathways in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Sector

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ACRONYMS

B. Ed.	Bachelor's in Education
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
Dip	Diploma
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EPWP	Expanded Public Works Programme
ETDP	Education, Training and Development Practices
FCM	Family and Community Motivator
FET	Further Education and Training
F.U.N.	Funda Udlale Nathi
GET	General Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
NATED	National Accredited Technical Education Diploma
NCV	National Certificate Vocational
NIECDP	National Integrated ECD Policy
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RTO	Resource and Training Organisation
SACE	South African Council for Educators
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SIP	Social Implementing Partner
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood development (ECD) practitioners are a critical cadre in the ECD workforce, providing early care and learning opportunities to young children in South Africa through a variety of delivery platforms, and engaging parents to support them in creating a nurturing and stimulating home environment. The primary form of state funding for early learning programmes is a means-tested, per-child subsidy. Most practitioners are employed in the non-profit sector or private, small business enterprises. Based on the 2021 ECD census, most practitioners employed in non-profit and private early learning programmes have not obtained a basic ECD qualification; this is true of staff in 61% of subsidised, compared to 66% of staff in unsubsidised ECD centres.¹ This scenario is also impacted by poor workforce retention of qualified ECD staff, primarily due to poor working conditions including low earnings.

This report responds to key learning questions focused on available skilling and development programmes, the training providers, and the earning pathways in relation to qualifications, and the significant stakeholders involved. Finally, the report considers key drivers resulting in the actual earnings of ECD practitioners and provides concluding remarks and recommendations.

2. STRUCTURED SKILLING PATHWAYS AVAILABLE FOR CAREERS IN THE ECD SECTOR – ACCREDITED AND NON-ACCREDITED

2.1 Structured accredited pathways

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF), implemented in South Africa since 1995, is the overarching system for registering, recording, and recognising qualifications, and provides the context and structure for education and training throughout the country. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is the oversight body for the qualifications system and framework. Reference is made to the NQF levels of qualification throughout this report.

It is important to differentiate between the General Education and Training band (GET)²; Further Education and Training (FET), which is equivalent to Grade 10 to 12; and Higher Education (HE), which is post-matric training. Current ECD training programmes that are not at the HE level are predominantly conceptualised as vocational or occupational programmes, and should emphasise practice-based components in addition to theory. Key details on the primary ECD qualifications are described below, and summarised in Appendix A.

¹ World Bank Group and Dept of Basic Education (2022). *Public Expenditure and Institutional Review for ECD*. The World Bank: Washington, DC.

² The General Education and Training band (GET) refers to the basic education phase available through the South African education system, ending at Grade 9.

2.1.1. Occupational programmes

Training for ECD qualifications is made available through Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, accredited non-profit Resource and Training Organisations (RTOs), and for-profit enterprises. For the purposes of this report, for-profit enterprises are excluded. The recognised entry-level qualification for employment in the field of Education, Development and Training, and particularly ECD, is the **NQF Level 4 FET Certificate**³. This level of qualification on the NQF is equivalent to a matric certificate. In 2021, about 350 training providers were registered with SAQA to offer the FET Certificate; including private training institutions, public TVETs and private FET institutions.⁴ The FET Certificate has been deregistered, and a new, equivalent qualification called the **NQF Level 4 Occupational Certificate: ECD practitioner** has replaced it. However, phasing out the FET Certificate is taking longer than expected, and there is an expectation that the two programmes will operate in parallel in the short-to-medium term.⁵ There is concern that the completion requirements for the Occupational Certificate are overly stringent⁶, which may adversely affect training numbers. These programmes qualify learners to work as ECD practitioners under supervision, competent to teach the 0–4-year age group, and to operate their own ECD service or programme. An **Occupational Certificate: ECD practitioner NQF Level 3** is in the pipeline.⁷

A further **NQF Level 5 Higher Certificate: ECD** is available. This is considered an advanced qualification and equips practitioners to teach the birth-to-6-year age group or operate their own early learning programme. While it is possible to specialise as a Grade R (Reception year) teacher with this certificate, career and further qualification options are limited.

Both these Level 4 and Level 5 training programmes are particularly being used to enable existing unqualified practitioners already employed in ECD settings to obtain the necessary qualifications. However, the Level 5 qualification is set to expire in June 2023. A **Higher Occupational Certificate: Early Child Development Centre Manager NQF Level 5** has been developed and will subsequently be phased in to replace the current Higher Certificate.

An **NQF Level 5 Diploma in ECD** is also available and SAQA-registered; about 135 providers are accredited and registered with SAQA to offer this qualification.⁸ The intention of the diploma qualification is to serve as a bridge to more formalised ECD qualification programmes⁹ and to provide access to a recognised educator qualification at Level 6 for ECD teachers.¹⁰

³ Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA) (2021). *ETD Sector Skills Plan 2022-2023*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Personal communication, ETDP SETA representative, May 2023.

⁶ Personal communication, former DHET representative, June 2023. These stringent requirements refer to 1) the need for an external examination for summative assessment rather than purely verification of accredited provider tasks; and 2) an approved workplace to complete their accreditation. Both of these are additions from previous programmes.

⁷ ETDP SETA (2022) Overview of the AQP. <https://www.etdpseta.org.za/etd/aqp-overview>.

⁸ <https://allqs.saga.org.za/showQualification.php?id=64650>.

⁹ The Centre for Social Development, Rhodes University offers a seamless transition from NQF level 5 to an in-service Bachelor of Education degree course in Foundation Phase Teaching. This is an exception.

¹⁰ Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA) (2021). *ETD Sector Skills Plan 2022-2023*.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has the responsibility for ensuring ECD practitioners are trained, primarily utilising the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) and Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) to fund learnerships¹¹ (supervised workplace learning) to enable quality outcomes.¹²

2.1.2. Additional TVET college offerings

Other ECD training programmes offered at TVET colleges include the **National Certificate Vocational (NCV)**, equivalent to a matric certificate, which allows learners to follow an education stream and to specialise in ECD. This is a three-year programme allowing learners to progress through NQF levels 2 to 4. While this programme enables learners to qualify at NQF level 4, the quality of the qualification is not the same as the FET or Occupational Certificates and therefore learners can only obtain employment as ECD assistants. There is also no clear pathway into higher education after completion.¹³

A further TVET option is the **National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED)** or Report 191 programme, which has an Educare offering. It consists of an 18-month theory-based programme and an 18-month practical placement in an ECD environment. The NATED Educare programme has been discontinued¹⁴ and is phasing out but several TVET colleges are still offering it and it continues to be funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The NATED has been criticised for failing to meet its practical application objectives, with many ECD learners not receiving support to access the required workplace experience nor receiving a quality practical experience.¹⁵

A 2021 Education, Training and Development Practices (ETDP) SETA¹⁶ report acknowledged with concern, the low enrolment numbers for both TVET offerings across all provinces.¹⁷ The report goes on to note the need for ETDP SETA to form partnerships with training providers to track ECD qualifications outputs.

A 2014 audit of public TVET (then FET) colleges provided information on 18 colleges offering ECD programmes.¹⁸ Table 1 below provides a summary of those same colleges regarding their current ECD

¹¹ Generally, a one-year programme that includes training, work experience and a stipend to enable financial support during the programme.

¹² World Bank Group and Dept of Basic Education (2022). *Public Expenditure and Institutional Review for ECD*. The World Bank: Washington, DC.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <https://falsebaycollege.co.za/education-studies-2/national-certificate-n5-n6-educare/>; Personal communication, former DHET representative, June 2023.

¹⁵ Murray and Biersteker (2014) *TVET Colleges: Contributions to towards HR Development in the Early childhood development sector*. Ilifa Labantwana.

¹⁶ The ETDP SETA is approved by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations as an Assessment Quality Partner to oversee the management of external integrated summative assessments. It's function relates to the occupational qualifications it has developed with stakeholders, that are registered with SAQA.

¹⁷ Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA) (2021). *ETD Sector Skills Plan 2022-2023*.

¹⁸ Murray and Biersteker (2014) *TVET Colleges: Contributions to towards HR Development in the Early childhood development sector*. Ilifa Labantwana.

offerings. Learner fees for the NCV with ECD specialisation range from R10, 262 - R11, 573 per year, per course. Fees for the NATED/Report 191 course range from R4, 800 - R7, 900 per year.

Table 1: ECD course offerings of selected public TVET Colleges

College	NATED/Report 191	NCV with ECD stream	NQF Level 4 and/or Level 5*
Boland TVET College			
Buffalo City TVET College			
Port Elizabeth TVET College			
Ingwe TVET College			
Goldfields TVET College			
Umgungundlovu TVET College			
South West Gauteng TVET College			
Waterberg TVET College			
Gert Sibande TVET College			
Orbit TVET College			
False Bay TVET College			
Northern Cape Urban TVET College			
College of Cape Town TVET			
Mnambithi TVET College			
Northlink TVET College			
South Cape TVET College			
Vuselela TVET College			
West Coast TVET College			

Note: Information was sourced from colleges’ websites; available information may not be up to date.

*Learnerships are suggested for about seven colleges, however different terms used makes verification difficult.

	Course not available
	Course available

2.1.3. Higher Education programmes

Higher Education Institution (HEI) programmes are available through public universities and private HE institutions and are currently predominantly targeted at Grade R and Foundation Phase teachers. The basic entry requirement is a matric certificate, although different programmes have varying entry requirements. Available degree courses include Early Childhood Care and Education, Bachelor of Education (Foundation), and Grade R. For example, the University of South Africa offers a Bachelor of Primary Education: Early Childhood Development which is conceptualised to be equivalent to NQF level 7. However, there is poor articulation between the NQF basic occupational qualifications and entry to HE programmes, as most universities don’t recognise the NQF qualifications.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid.; Personal communication, ETDPA SETA representative, May 2023; Personal communication, former DHET representative, June 2023.

ECD study programmes at a graduate and post-graduate level focused on the pre-Grade R age group, are not widely available in South Africa.²⁰ In 2017, the *Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Development Educators* was introduced. For the first time, the policy conceptualised a basket of HE study programmes for practitioners and teachers working with the birth-to-4-year age range.²¹ As a step toward implementation of this policy, DHET has provided guidelines for an Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Diploma and Bachelor’s programme, and some HEIs have prepared to offer it. This includes a new Diploma in ECCE, birth to 4 years (Level 6) and Bachelor of Education in ECCE, birth to 4 years (Level 7) programmes which were set in motion in 2021.²² Table 2 provides a list of HEIs who have proceeded with the required application and accreditation processes through DHET and the Council for Higher Education.

Table 2: Higher Education Institutions to offer new birth to 4 years study programmes

Institution	Qualification to be offered	NQF Level
Cape Peninsula University	Dip. ECCE	6
University of Free State	Dip. ECCE	6
University of South Africa	Dip. ECCE	6
University of Fort Hare	Dip. ECCE	6
	B. Ed. ECCE	7
North West University	B. Ed. ECCE	7
University of KwaZulu-Natal	B. Ed. ECCE	7
University of Pretoria	B. Ed. ECCE	7
University of Witwatersrand	B. Ed. ECCE	7
Walter Sisulu University	B. Ed. ECCE	7
University of Western Cape	Higher Certificate ECCE	5

2.1.4. Other development programmes and short courses to enable basic ECD qualification

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a critical element in the consideration of entry requirements for learning programmes, in a context where the majority of practicing ECD principals (70%) and practitioners (77%) have a matric or below grade 12 as their highest qualification.²³ RPL is formally permitted by SAQA for the level 4 and 5 occupational programmes²⁴, requiring learners to make evidence of their prior experience and knowledge available during assessment. According to SAQA²⁵, evidence can be provided through:

- a) international and/or previous local qualifications
- b) products, reports, testimonials, or work records
- c) portfolios, videos of practice and performance records.

²⁰ Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2022. Baseline Assessment. Technical Report.

²¹ DHET (2017) *Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Development Educators*. Government gazette No. 40750.

²² PIECCE <https://www.saide.org.za/article.php?id=49>

²³ Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2022) Baseline Assessment. Technical Report.

²⁴ <https://regqs.saqa.org.za/showQualification.php?id=58761>;

<https://allqs.saqa.org.za/showQualification.php?id=64649>

²⁵ Ibid.

It is noteworthy that of the 18 TVET colleges identified in Table 1, only one college clearly provided information on its website about RPL as part of its admission criteria. RPL seems to be concentrated at the HE level, with practice lagging behind policy development, resulting in restricted uptake. Language is also a barrier as most RPL processes are conducted in English.²⁶ Due to its individualised nature, RPL is time-consuming and therefore costly, and funding is inadequate.

Some training providers offer bridging, short-term²⁷ or part-time skills-based programmes to enable individuals to meet the entry requirements for the NQF level 4 courses, the basic ECD qualification. Entry requirements differ. Some institutions accept NQF level 1 if the learner is already employed in the ECD sector. Work experience may be considered, and according to an ETDP SETA official, individuals with a Grade 7 level of education who have sufficient experience can be accepted into the NQF level 4 programmes.²⁸ If skills-based programmes are accredited with the EDTP SETA, learners will gain credits toward a qualification. However, stakeholders on the ground report that existing RPL processes are not functioning adequately.²⁹

Some TVET college programmes enable qualification at NQF level 1 according to their websites; however, the level 1 qualification expired in 2013 and has not been re-registered. A certificate at the level of GET is obtained. Entry requirements differ, however, some TVET colleges who offer the GET certificate specialising in ECD require a Grade 9 pass and employment in an ECD setting. Once qualified, employment options include classroom assistant, working with babies, or as a day mother.³⁰ Similarly, bridging courses may be available for those pursuing the Higher Certificate in ECD but who have not obtained the NQF level 4 qualification.³¹

The ETDP SETA has an RPL project for ECD practitioners to facilitate attainment of the FET Certificate: ECD Practitioner level 4, delivered through TVET colleges.³² ETDP SETA officials play a role in the external moderation and assessments. Table 3 below illustrates the progress of the RPL project since 2016/17. While it is commendable that high completion rates have been steadily maintained since 2017/18, the number of participating TVET colleges have declined, indicating that access to the project is restricted to a handful of colleges. For the 2023/24 year, funding is available for 400 ECD practitioners to participate in the project, with three provinces earmarked for implementation.³³ The number of practitioners reached annually through this project will need significant review to cater for the expansion required to meet the objectives of a qualified, scaled-up ECD practitioner workforce.

Some TVET colleges offer a bridging programme for school leavers known as a ‘pre-vocational’ learning programme which gives learners a taste of the content and approach of available courses and

²⁶ PIECCE (2019). Birth to Four Programme Framework. Recognition of Prior Learning Chapter 10 Summary.

²⁷ For example, Ntataise offers short, practical courses focused on the physical and cognitive development of young children. <https://www.ntataise.org/accredited-training-and-qualifications>.

²⁸ Personal communication, ETDP SETA representative, May 2023.

²⁹ Personal communication, former DHET representative, June 2023.

³⁰ <https://falsebaycollege.co.za/education-studies-2/getc-early-childhood-development-nqf-level-1>.

³¹ The South African Childcare Association offers a bridging course if learners have matric.

³² Hlalefang Raziya (June 2023) The ETDP SETA RPL Project for ECD Practitioners. ETDP SETA. Presentation to the NECDA ECD Alliance, AGM, 8th June 2023.

³³ Ibid.

facilitates an awareness of the possible vocational or occupational routes they could pursue and supports those who are not meeting the entry requirements for their chosen route.

Table 3: Availability and completion of the ETDP SETA RPL Project for ECD Practitioners

Year	Number of TVET colleges	Number of enrolments	Number of completions	Completion rate (%)
2016/17	7	300	136	45
2017/18	4	250	176	70
2018/19	4	300	293	98
2019/20	2	150	142	95
2020/21	3	200	186	93
2021/22*	3	200	185	93
2022/23*	4	250	-	-

* These years are part of the current RPL project, figures are therefore not final or not yet available.

There has been some movement toward professionalisation of the ECD practitioner workforce since the shift in the ECD function from DSD to DBE in April 2022. The South African Council for Educators (SACE) has in place a set of teaching standards, and a system of Continuing Professional Development credit requirements which can contribute to the upskilling and continuing improvement of the workforce. However, SACE guidelines for professional teaching standards do not currently include the birth-to-four-year age group. As part of their Learning through Play initiative, the VVOB supported by DBE, has commissioned a consortium known as the *Funda Udlale Nathi* (F.U.N.) ECD professional standards team to support professionalisation of ECD practitioners. The team plan on developing³⁴:

- a) ECD-specific professional teaching standards
- b) A suggested professional pathway for ECD practitioners, and
- c) Recommended guidelines for training providers on the development of ECD training programmes.

Articulation and alignment across the Occupational/Vocational, Education and Training qualification streams with professional qualifications is necessary to provide an accessible, inclusive professional learning pathway, and to realise the objectives of the Minimum Requirements Policy. The F.U.N. ECD professional standards team is taking a systemic approach to professional development, considering the birth to nine continuum and a qualifications continuum that will explore different entry and exit points, providing access and support to progress through a professional learning pathway. The team will also evaluate and align SACE guidelines for training providers that support flexible, quality provision.³⁵

2.2. Structured non-accredited pathways

Strategic implementing partners (SIPs) and other social sector organisations interested in capacity development provide a range of non-accredited training options to support the early learning

³⁴ Sheila Drew (March 2023) ECD professional teaching standards. SAIDE. Presentation to the BRIDGE National ECD community of practice; <https://southafrica.vvob.org/funda-udlale-nathi-fun>.

³⁵ Ibid.

workforce in a variety of ways. The [SIP database](#) that has been developed was searched for references to non-accredited training, and the following forms of training were identified:

1. Early learning, literacy and curriculum programme content

Several organisations provide training to support ECD practitioners and principals with the development of their literacy and learning programmes and curricula. This includes:

- book sharing, storytelling and other forms of literacy training;
- learning materials and toy-making training; and
- coaching in the trainers' own curriculum and specific modalities, such as Blocks for Growth.

2. Operational management, leadership, and business development

A second group of training programmes relate to management and leadership skills development. Some trainers focus on the operational skills required to manage an ECD service such as financial, human resource management and implementing a daily child development programme, while others focus on entrepreneurial skills development.

3. Parent training

Training providers also indicate that they offer parent training or parenting programmes. It is not clear whether the provider directly engages with parents, or whether they train ECD programmes to offer parent training programmes. A few providers referenced positive parenting as the emphasis of their training.

4. Nutrition support

Another basket of training support relates to nutrition training, including the provision of training of ECD centre cooks to provide nutritious and adequate meals. Other details on these programmes were less clear.

5. Community development

A handful of training providers offer training for ECD home and community-based practitioners (refer to Table 4 below) with a focus on vulnerable families and young children, such as training targeted at Family and Community Motivators (FCMs). FCMs are non-centre-based ECD practitioners who conduct home visits to vulnerable families with children younger than 6 years and pregnant women, to provide support and advice, and stimulating activities for young children.

3. ACTUAL EXIT PATHWAYS FROM ECD SKILLING AND ENTRY PATHWAYS INTO THE ECD SECTOR

Skilling, qualification, and career pathways are unclear in the sector. There is also a lack of entrepreneurial skills, which is a critical skill area as qualified ECD practitioners have the option to operate their own microenterprises or participate in social franchising or other entrepreneurial models. A clear route for the expansion of childcare and early learning programme provision, in the face of continued poor state funding, is microenterprise development. An improved focus on entrepreneurial and business management skills will enable the creation of new ECD businesses, the

sustainability of existing ECD operations, and enhance programme quality, accountability, and efficiency.

Available evidence suggests that there is low labour absorption from training programmes, including the Youth Employment Service and ETDP SETA learnerships.³⁶ There is therefore growing impetus for encouraging practitioners to lead microenterprises in the sector, as one innovative model, SmartStart has demonstrated.³⁷

To better understand the pathways into the ECD sector, it is important to consider the career options available. The National Integrated ECD Policy (NIECDP), 2015³⁸ provides a comprehensive understanding of ECD as covering the developmental stages from conception to school-going age. It also consolidates a multi-dimensional service provision approach to support optimal early development, including the domains of:

- Maternal and child health
- Food security and nutrition
- Parent support
- Childcare and early learning
- Social and child protection (including birth registration and social grants)
- Public communication programmes on ECD services and support

In particular, the Policy promotes a continuum of care approach for the delivery of services from family homes to community spaces, to facility or centre-based services. The ECD sector includes a diverse workforce that integrates early learning with the delivery of other essential elements such as health, safety, and nutrition.³⁹ Table 4 below sketches the available career opportunities for direct services by place of provision and notes the service elements that should be delivered. Technical and support jobs, such as drivers, administrators, and community workers who support ECD centre registration, are not included here.

There is little distinction in earnings across the roles reflected in Table 4. The majority of ECD centre-based practitioners earn below minimum wage⁴⁰ (earnings are discussed in more detail in section 4). However, ECD practitioners and facilitators working in community or home-based settings generally earn less than those located in centres. This cadre of workers earn stipends at similar rates to those provided by the Community Works Programme, i.e., in the region of R650 a month.⁴¹ Aside from ECD

³⁶ Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator (2022). Social and Care Economy. Report on ECD Bilateral engagements (presentation).

³⁷ <https://smartstart.org.za/investors-funders>.

³⁸ Republic of South Africa. 2015. National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy. Pretoria: Government Printers.

³⁹ Sheila Drew (March 2023) ECD professional teaching standards. SAIDE. Presentation to the BRIDGE National ECD community of practice.

⁴⁰ Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2022. Baseline Assessment. Technical Report.

⁴¹ This amount is for eight days of work per month. Sourced from: www.gov.za/CommunityWorkProgramme#:~:text=Presently%2C%20regular%20CWP%20participants%20who, receive%20R106%2Fday%20in%20stipends.

centre principals/operators and day mothers, the roles described here are generally staff employed by non-profit organisations to deliver services to young children and their families.

Table 4: ECD workforce opportunities across the continuum of care

Place of provision	Options	Services and support
Homes with pregnant women and/or young children	Home-visiting practitioner	Early care, maternal and child nutrition, development and learning
	Parent support facilitator	Basic pregnancy support and maternal care
	Community health worker (with ECD training) e.g., Philani mentor mothers	Support access to birth registration/ID documents, social grants and income-generating opportunities.
Community	Day mother/Childminder	Early care and learning
	Play-group practitioner (child only and mother and child groups)	Basic food provision and nutrition support
	Child and family literacy promoter	Support access to birth registration/ID documents, social grants and income-generating opportunities
	Community-wide child development programme facilitators e.g., ECD mobiles, play parks, parenting programmes	Parent engagement
	Toy librarians	
	Community care/development workers	
Facility/Centre (only the early learning domain)	ECD practitioners/teachers	Early care and learning
	ECD assistants/ assistant teachers	Basic nutrition support
	ECD principals	Parent engagement (limited)
	Cooks	

Practitioners' experience counts, including their previous job prior to working in their current ECD setting. The DBE's 2022 baseline assessment of over 500 early learning programmes found that 42% of ECD practitioners had five years or less experience as a practitioner. Just over a quarter (28%) had more than 10 years' experience. More than a third (38%) of practitioners were working in another industry prior to their current employment, and 25% were unemployed. Only 10% had moved from another ECD-related job. These figures suggest a fair degree of movement in terms of individuals' entering and leaving the sector.⁴²

⁴² Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2022. Baseline Assessment. Technical Report.

The SmartStart model is a useful example of innovation in the provision of early learning programmes for young children in the South African context, with an emphasis on service provision in under-resourced communities. They promote microenterprise development and support franchisees with both ECD-specific basic training, mentoring and coaching, and business development and management. SmartStart is used as a case study example here for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of entry and exit pathways into and from the ECD sector.

About 60% of current SmartStart franchisees were unemployed prior to joining the programme.⁴³ Data on reasons for franchisees leaving SmartStart shows that close to one-quarter (23%) cites employment opportunities, and therefore better income, as the primary reason for discontinuing their ECD service.⁴⁴ This scenario occurs despite SmartStart supporting franchisees by providing stipends within the first two years to enable start-up of the franchise; and actually, more than 75% of inactive franchisees leave within the first 24 months.⁴⁵

This situation portrays the sector-wide phenomena of low income in the ECD sector, and the reliance on user fees to enable the operation of early learning programmes. The recent ECD census reports that 69% of early learning programmes indicate user fees as their main funding source.⁴⁶ The situation is particularly dire for programmes serving low-income communities (quintiles one and two), such as SmartStart. On average, franchisees receive a monthly programme income of R1,974.⁴⁷ This amount includes the SmartStart stipend (R500 per month) and income from user fees. Most franchisees report charging an average of R200 per child; this is similar to the fees charged by early learning programmes serving quintiles one and two, as per the ECD census.⁴⁸ User fees vary across provinces, with Northern Cape franchisees reporting charging as low as R64 per child.⁴⁹

However, SmartStart has piloted a business mentorship programme which shows increases in franchisees' income for those participating in the programme⁵⁰; this might hold promise for improving the financial viability of SmartStarts' programmes in the future.

4. DRIVERS / OBSTACLES RESULTING IN LOW EARNING PATHWAYS

4.1. Informality and vulnerability of the ECD sector

The salaries of entry-level early childhood educators are pegged between R3,160 and R7,551;⁵¹ however, ECD programmes in quintiles 1 – 3 are mostly provided by non-profit, subsistence

⁴³ Personal communication, SmartStart representative, June 2023.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ DBE and Lego Foundation (2022). ECD Census 2021. Pretoria: DBE.

⁴⁷ Personal communication, SmartStart representative, June 2023.

⁴⁸ DBE and Lego Foundation (2022). ECD Census 2021. Pretoria: DBE.

⁴⁹ Personal communication, SmartStart representative, June 2023.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ WageIndicator 2023 - Mywage.co.za. <https://mywage.co.za/work-smart/role-pay/early-childhood-educators>.

entrepreneurs and microsocial enterprises. Those serving the poorest communities are often small and informal. The informality of the sector results in precarious and low-paying jobs. Practitioner wages are typically below minimum wage.⁵² The DBE 2022 baseline assessment records 89,5% of ECD practitioners earning below R3,500 per month for a 40-hour work week. Over a third (37%) earn between R1,001 – R2,000, and another 30% between R2,001 – 3,500 per month.⁵³ The sample included in this assessment represents more formalised and subsidised early learning programmes⁵⁴; the practitioners included here are in a better position than their counterparts in less formal, unfunded programmes.

In 2020, the income of ECD practitioners was estimated⁵⁵ at an average of R2,000 (unsubsidised programmes) and R3,000 (subsidised programmes) per month: these rates were used to gauge the income support required by the sector during the Covid-19 crisis.⁵⁶ SmartStart franchisees currently receive in the region of R500 to R1,974 per month from programme income.⁵⁷ For service providers working in higher quintiles, income earnings are higher: a quintile 3 provider offers remuneration for teachers at about R2,800 and R5,000 for ECD centre principals.

An ETDP SETA representative estimated that practitioners in community-based centres are earning between R1,000 – R2,000 per month.⁵⁸ He noted that these ECD practitioners are for all intents and purposes considered unemployed and are therefore offered a stipend when they enrol in a learnership programme. A former DHET representative remarked that ECD practitioners are not earning a wage, rather their earnings should be considered as stipends because it is so inadequate.⁵⁹

4.2. Inadequate government funding of ECD programmes

Even if early learning programmes receive a government subsidy, the use of the subsidy is prescribed, with only 30% of the per child amount being allocated to salaries as per the subsidy guidelines.⁶⁰ The subsidy alone does not enable operators to cover operating costs, including paying their staff minimum wage. Therefore, programmes receiving a subsidy are also reliant on fees to make up the shortfall in their operational costs – although their fees are three times lower than those of unsubsidised programmes.⁶¹ Fees are also an unreliable source of income and non-payment further exacerbates programme's financial instability: only 8% of programmes from the DBE baseline assessment indicated that all parents paid their fees in the previous month.⁶²

⁵² IDRC, Canada and Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator (2022). Sizing the opportunity in South Africa's care economy.

⁵³ Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2022. Baseline Assessment. Technical Report.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ These estimates were based on the average salaries reported in the 2014 ECD Audit, inflated to 2020 prices.

⁵⁶ BRIDGE, Ilifa Labantwana, NECDA, Nelson Mandela Foundation, Smart Start and SACECD April 2020. The Plight of the ECD Workforce: An urgent call for relief in the wake of COVID-19. Sourced from: <https://www.bridge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Final-report-The-plight-of-the-ECD-workforce-1.pdf>

⁵⁷ Personal communication, SmartStart representative, June 2023.

⁵⁸ Personal communication, ETDP SETA representative, May 2023.

⁵⁹ Personal communication, former DHET representative, June 2023.

⁶⁰ BRIDGE, Ilifa Labantwana, NECDA, Nelson Mandela Foundation, Smart Start and SACECD April 2020. The Plight of the ECD Workforce: An urgent call for relief in the wake of COVID-19. Sourced from: <https://www.bridge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Final-report-The-plight-of-the-ECD-workforce-1.pdf>

⁶¹ DBE and Lego Foundation (2022). ECD Census 2021. Pretoria: DBE.

⁶² Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2022. Baseline Assessment. Technical Report.

Programmes also seem to have poor access to other forms of government support for practitioner salaries such as the EPWP, the Community Works Programme, and the Youth Employment Service initiative: 95% of programmes from the DBE baseline assessment responded that they are not benefitting from these funding sources.⁶³

The extent of inequality is evident when comparisons are made of government spending on the early education sector: the Grade R sector receives 60% of the envelope (the total budget was R95 billion in 2021/22), while 40% is allocated to children below grade R. The primary driver of this large difference is the average salary costs of Grade R educators compared to that of ECD practitioners: the annual cost of ECD practitioners is five times less than the cost of Grade R teachers.⁶⁴ The substantial salary difference has implications for the retention of ECD practitioners, as qualified and experienced ECD staff are likely to move to formal Grade R teaching.

Not only is the subsidy inadequate (experts suggest that it should increase from R17 per child per day to R31 to minimally cover programme operational costs⁶⁵), but it is also not reaching its intended targets. Provincial departments report not having sufficient budget to reach all eligible children. This has resulted in, for example, only 40% of eligible 4-and 5-year-olds receiving the subsidy.⁶⁶ The co-funding of ECD programmes has resulted in the poorest 60% of households spending R3,7 billion in terms of total national household expenditure, while government's spending on the ECD subsidy was R2,8 billion in 2019/20. While the introduction of the ECD conditional grant increased expenditure on ECD programmes in real terms, a parallel increase in programme enrolment rates across the country has not been evident.⁶⁷

The bureaucratic and systemic challenges inherent in obtaining registration and therefore, access to the subsidy, is a significant obstacle to enabling financial support to the ECD sector. Staff qualifications are also linked to registration standard requirements, with the 'gold' status requiring staff to have the NQF level 4 or 5 or similar ECD qualification, or three years of work experience with children.⁶⁸ However, once a programme is registered and funded, it is unlikely to be able to adequately compensate practitioners in line with their qualifications. Even once funding has been obtained, administrative and procedural blockages result in fluctuating monthly programme income. Management of funds for fixed costs, such as staff, becomes problematic.⁶⁹

4.3. Poor funding and inadequate systems to deliver ECD practitioner training programmes

The low and irregular expenditure on training and development programmes for practitioners, the low remuneration levels and other poor working conditions, contributes to high staff turnover and a lack of sustainability for ECD programmes.⁷⁰

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ World Bank Group and Dept of Basic Education (2022). *Public Expenditure and Institutional Review for ECD*. The World Bank: Washington, DC.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Overall, training opportunities are limited, with some provinces worse off than others. In 2022, only 6% of practitioners included in the DBE baseline assessment were accessing the DBE learnership.⁷¹ Budget constraints and fluctuations in funding limits proper planning. Different circumstances in the provinces also result in inequitable delivery of training programmes. For example:

- In KwaZulu-Natal, training using the social sector EPWP commenced in 2020 to support 1,713 practitioners to undertake NQF level 4 training; however, no further funding has been allocated since then.
- In the Eastern Cape, it seems that training last occurred in 2010, due to conflict with the internal provincial DBE procurement processes for ECD service providers.
- In 2021 and 2022, about 600 learnerships were provided in the Western Cape for NQF level 4, and around 1,000 learnerships for NQF level 5 through TVET colleges, funded via ETDP SETA and EPWP.⁷²

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the current system of training provisioning is inadequate to respond to the vast need, particularly if expansion of ECD programmes to enable universal access to early learning for young children, especially the most vulnerable, is to become a reality. Some of the challenges relate to high barriers to entry for formalised programmes (e.g. academic entry requirements, language of tuition), stringent requirements for programme completion, difficulty accessing workplace experience, insufficient number of training institutions (particularly amongst RPL programmes) and poor funding towards training opportunities. The number of stakeholders involved in the registration, accreditation, quality assurance and delivery of training programmes also makes these processes cumbersome, creating administrative and other blockages for non-profit SIPs seeking to comply with government requirements and to access funding.

There also appears to be a lack of oversight, accountability, and cohesion within the current landscape of private, non-profit and HEI providing ECD qualifications, particularly with regards to courses that have been deregistered by SAQA, the availability and funding of learnerships, access to RPL, and the non-alignment between the occupational qualifications and HEI diploma and degree courses. There are some promising practices such as specific universities that are intentional about aligning occupational qualifications with their courses, and innovative initiatives such as F.U.N. that are carefully considering qualification pathways, developing guidelines for alignment, and engaging with relevant role-players.⁷³

While professionalisation of the sector is one avenue for overall improvement, a simultaneous approach must include increasing both public and private financing of the sector to enable more viable

⁷¹ Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2022. Baseline Assessment. Technical Report.

⁷² World Bank Group and Dept of Basic Education (2022). *Public Expenditure and Institutional Review for ECD*. The World Bank: Washington, DC.

⁷³ Sheila Drew (March 2023) ECD professional teaching standards. SAIDE. Presentation to the BRIDGE National ECD community of practice.

working conditions for current practitioners, and for those that are in the training pipeline desiring to pursue a career in ECD.

5.1. Key recommendations

1. Support and build on promising initiatives.

- a. The F.U.N. initiative has the potential to holistically address many of the systemic barriers currently experienced with regards to obtaining ECD qualifications and enabling the alignment of qualifications across the education and training sector.
 - b. The development of learning programmes for birth to 4 years to be offered by HEI fills a key gap in the suite of available programmes. Supporting the implementation of this initiative, advocating for its timely delivery, and monitoring uptake and impact on the ECD sector will be a valuable contribution.
2. Advocate and build partnerships for the promotion of the **recognition of occupational and vocational qualifications by higher education institutions and authorities**, for the facilitation of improved alignment between occupational qualifications and higher education access.
 3. Conduct further research into the **RPL barriers and enablers** to formulate a deeper understanding of systemic levers for change, to advocate for greater investment and planning for expansion. Expanding access through partnership with a larger number of TVET colleges or other training providers is critical to reduce current inequities in access.
 4. Both the DBE and other government stakeholders are considering **solutions to meeting the vast training need for a basic ECD qualification**.⁷⁴ Supporting and contributing to these discussions and the development of a developmental human resource plan would be valuable.
 5. Support and promote the provision of **non-accredited training in the areas of management, leadership and business development**. These skills will enable the expansion of early learning programmes through the development of new microenterprises and will enable existing ECD operators to meet the norms and standards in relation to governance, financial management and accountability mechanisms⁷⁵, and thereby facilitate access to the subsidy.
 6. Support and promote improved state funding for ECD programmes aligned to the state's commitments to public provisioning of ECD services in the NIECDP, targeted at **increased salaries for ECD practitioners across all settings**. Retention of staff is a persistent challenge, and the constant training and development of new staff contributes to the inefficiencies in the system. Improved pay is likely to result in improved teaching and learning, higher staff morale, and overall improvements in quality outcomes. The inequity in income between centre-based and non-centre-based practitioners should also be recognised and addressed. The over-reliance on user fees should be reduced, particularly for programmes serving quintiles 1 to 2. The promotion of government sources of funding for ECD practitioner salaries is required to create awareness, and assisting ECD programmes, particularly in the lower quintiles, to access them.

⁷⁴ Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2022. Baseline Assessment. Technical Report; World Bank Group and Dept of Basic Education (2022). *Public Expenditure and Institutional Review for ECD*. The World Bank: Washington, DC.

⁷⁵ Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2022. Baseline Assessment. Technical Report.

Appendix A: Summary of ECD qualifications

Course type	Qualification*	Primary provider	NQF Level and status	Entry requirements**
Degree	For example: ECCE, B.Ed. Foundation Phase Teaching, Grade R	Public and private Higher Education Institutions	Level 7, Available	Matric certificate.
Diploma	National N Dip: Educare (Report 191 or NATED)	Public and private accredited TVET Colleges	Level 5 (certificates N4 - N6) Level 6 on completion Phasing out	Matric certificate or equivalent.
	Dip: ECD	Higher Education Institutions including public and private accredited TVET Colleges	Level 5, Available	Matric certificate or equivalent.
Certificate	National certificate vocational (NCV)	Public and private accredited TVET Colleges	Levels 2 to 4, Available	Grade 9
	Higher Certificate: ECD	Offered by accredited providers: generally TVET colleges and RTOs	Level 5, Phasing out	Matric certificate or equivalent. RPL may be considered.
	Occupational Certificate: ECD practitioner	Offered by accredited providers: generally TVET colleges and RTOs	Level 4, Available	NQF level 3 RPL may be considered.
	Further Education and Training Certificate: ECD	Offered by accredited providers: generally TVET colleges and RTOs	Level 4, Phasing out	Grade 11 or 12 and/or NQF Level 1. RPL may be considered.

* Qualifications listed here are currently in operation. Planned programmes are not included here. The GET certificate: ECD is not included as it was deregistered in 2013.

**NB. Requirements differ by institution/training provider.