



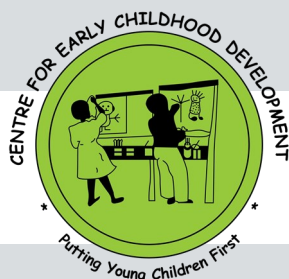
Quality Early Childhood Development in South Africa: Celebrating three decades of ECD in South Africa

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Conference Abstract Booklet & Programme

College of Cape Town
Crawford Campus
174 Kromboom Road,
Crawford, Cape Town

30 September - 2 October 2025



higher education
& training
Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

COLLEGE OF
CAPE TOWN 
Inspiring minds



This booklet contains all the abstracts and overviews for the presentations at the conference, *Quality Early Childhood Development in South Africa: Celebrating three decades of ECD in South Africa*. This includes presentations from the Khawuleza event on 30 September, breakaways sessions on 1 and 2 October, as well as plenary sessions. The presenter(s) for each presentation is indicated; for information on abstract co-authors please speak to the presenters directly. A detailed programme for the conference is also included here.

Day 1: Tuesday, 30 September 2025

10h00	Registration
11h15	Official Opening and Singing the National Anthem
11h30	Conference Welcome - College of Cape Town
11h40	Conference Opening Performance - College of Cape Town Children's Academy & CECD
12h00	Panel Discussion: Gauging Progress and Advancing Early Childhood Development <i>Wiedaad Slemming (Director of the Children's Institute at UCT, and Associate Professor in the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health at UCT);</i> <i>Linda Biersteker (Developmental Psychologist and adult educator focusing on early childhood development);</i> <i>Tatenda Mawoyo (Researcher at the Institute for Life Course Health Research at Stellenbosch University);</i> <i>Mastoera Sadan (Chief Sector Expert: Social, in the National Planning Commission (NPC) Secretariat, DPME).</i> Facilitator: Lori Lake, Communications and Education Specialist, Children's Institute, UCT
13h00	Networking, Exhibition walk through - Lunch
14h00	Keynote Address: <i>Dr Imtiaz Sooliman, Founder and Chairman of the Gift of the Givers</i>

Day 1: Tuesday, 30 September 2025

'Khawuleza' Event

14h30

1. Building on purpose: A walk through an ECD infrastructure project in an informal settlement	Sarah Atmore - CECD
2. Read & Play at Home - the Power of Partnerships in Parent Engagement	Dorette Louw - Book Dash
3. ECD Connect - the Helpful Assistant	Peter Schutte, Yome Twetwa, Justin Shanks - DGMT / ECD Connect
4. From Pit Toilets to Progress: How Safe Sanitation is Transforming ECD Learning Environments	Marion Wagner - Breadline Africa
5. Tech That Works For ECD: Scaling Quality, Not Just Content	Heléne Brand - Grow ECD
6. Best Practice Model in ECD - ECD High/Scope	Mmasoki Margaret Letsoalo - Golang-Kulani Early Learning Centre
7. From Level 4 to Diploma: A Bridge to ECD Success	Rebecca Wakeford - Midlands Community College & Ruby Motaung - TREE (Sivulithuba Collaboration)
8. Step by Step on the ECD Ladder	Cathy Gush - Lebone Centre
9. Engaging the Senses Through Play: Unlocking Children's Potential Through Meaningful Experiences	Chantel Fernandez - Maskew Miller Learning (MML)
10. Early Childhood Development as a Crime Prevention Strategy in South Africa	Roxanne Robbins - Play with a Purpose Educational Trust
11. Playgroups an Equalizer	Tseli Scharer - Ntataise Lowveld
12. A Call to Action: Supporting Fathers in Early Childhood Development	Jonathan Hoffenberg - The Parent Centre
13. Inclusion of Children with Disabilities - Challenges and Possibilities	Bulumko Woji - Shonaquip Social Enterprise
14. When Research Becomes a Tool for Justice	Amanda Mbali - Centre for Early Childhood Development

15h50 **Networking, Exhibition walk through - Tea/Coffee**

Day 2: Wednesday, 1 October 2025

Main Room																								
08h50	Day 2 Welcome																							
09h00	Panel Discussion: The Role of Local Government in Advancing Quality ECD in South Africa <i>Deputy Mayor Dr Ruben Richards - Cederberg Municipality; Cllr. Francine Higham, Mayoral Committee Member: Community Services and Health - City of Cape Town; Abé Du Plessis - Saldanha Bay Municipality; and Ntjantja Ned, Founder & CEO - Masoleng Rising.</i> Facilitator: Yusrah Ehrenreich, CECD																							
10h30	Networking, Exhibition walk through - Mid Morning Tea																							
	<table><tr><th>Main Room</th><th>Belgravia Minor Hall</th><th>Room 17/18</th><th>Room 19/20</th><th>Room 57</th></tr><tr><td>11h00</td><td>Listening as Learning: Fully Attuned in the Reggio Emilia Approach <i>Tessa Browne - Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance (NPC)</i></td><td>Cascading Competence and Capacity in Home-based ECD Programmes <i>Mary Venter & Rene King - Khululeka Community Education Development Centre</i></td><td>Strengthening ECD Centres, Building Communities: Five Years of the Kouga ECD Project - Jessica Blom - Centre for Early Childhood Development</td><td>Understanding Trauma in the ECD Space: Why Safety Comes Before Learning <i>Arina Kitching - Learn2Live Community Centre</i></td><td>Recognising a Constitutional Right to ECD in South Africa <i>Tatiana Kazim & Tshepo Mantje - Centre for Law and Society, University of Cape Town</i></td></tr><tr><td>12h00</td><td>Abandoned by Government, Trapped by Law: Unfunded Grade R Entangles Grade R Providers in Regulatory Webs <i>Tarryn Cooper-Bell, Katherine Sutherland & Daniel Peter Al-Naddaf - Equal Education Law Centre</i></td><td>Sowing Seeds of Change: A Farm-Based ECD Model for Rural Transformation in South Africa <i>Denver Swanepoel - ZIFUMANE Foundation</i></td><td>Redefining Foundational Learning and Pedagogical Leadership Through a Complexity-Informed Lens in Disadvantaged ECCE Contexts <i>Dr Ayesha Carrim - UNISA</i></td><td>Virtuous Hope, Responsive Care, and Early Learning: Findings from the iThemba Home-based ECD Programme <i>Lidia Matabaro - iThemba Projects</i></td><td>Measuring Practitioner Support for Self-sustained Engagement for Four- to Five-year-olds in South Africa: A Study of the Use of LEGO PLAY 2.0 Classroom Observation Tools <i>Nkhensani Baloyi & Roseisha Ishwardutt - JET Education Services & The Unlimited Child</i></td></tr><tr><td>13h00</td><td colspan="5">Lunch</td></tr></table>	Main Room	Belgravia Minor Hall	Room 17/18	Room 19/20	Room 57	11h00	Listening as Learning: Fully Attuned in the Reggio Emilia Approach <i>Tessa Browne - Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance (NPC)</i>	Cascading Competence and Capacity in Home-based ECD Programmes <i>Mary Venter & Rene King - Khululeka Community Education Development Centre</i>	Strengthening ECD Centres, Building Communities: Five Years of the Kouga ECD Project - Jessica Blom - Centre for Early Childhood Development	Understanding Trauma in the ECD Space: Why Safety Comes Before Learning <i>Arina Kitching - Learn2Live Community Centre</i>	Recognising a Constitutional Right to ECD in South Africa <i>Tatiana Kazim & Tshepo Mantje - Centre for Law and Society, University of Cape Town</i>	12h00	Abandoned by Government, Trapped by Law: Unfunded Grade R Entangles Grade R Providers in Regulatory Webs <i>Tarryn Cooper-Bell, Katherine Sutherland & Daniel Peter Al-Naddaf - Equal Education Law Centre</i>	Sowing Seeds of Change: A Farm-Based ECD Model for Rural Transformation in South Africa <i>Denver Swanepoel - ZIFUMANE Foundation</i>	Redefining Foundational Learning and Pedagogical Leadership Through a Complexity-Informed Lens in Disadvantaged ECCE Contexts <i>Dr Ayesha Carrim - UNISA</i>	Virtuous Hope, Responsive Care, and Early Learning: Findings from the iThemba Home-based ECD Programme <i>Lidia Matabaro - iThemba Projects</i>	Measuring Practitioner Support for Self-sustained Engagement for Four- to Five-year-olds in South Africa: A Study of the Use of LEGO PLAY 2.0 Classroom Observation Tools <i>Nkhensani Baloyi & Roseisha Ishwardutt - JET Education Services & The Unlimited Child</i>	13h00	Lunch				
Main Room	Belgravia Minor Hall	Room 17/18	Room 19/20	Room 57																				
11h00	Listening as Learning: Fully Attuned in the Reggio Emilia Approach <i>Tessa Browne - Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance (NPC)</i>	Cascading Competence and Capacity in Home-based ECD Programmes <i>Mary Venter & Rene King - Khululeka Community Education Development Centre</i>	Strengthening ECD Centres, Building Communities: Five Years of the Kouga ECD Project - Jessica Blom - Centre for Early Childhood Development	Understanding Trauma in the ECD Space: Why Safety Comes Before Learning <i>Arina Kitching - Learn2Live Community Centre</i>	Recognising a Constitutional Right to ECD in South Africa <i>Tatiana Kazim & Tshepo Mantje - Centre for Law and Society, University of Cape Town</i>																			
12h00	Abandoned by Government, Trapped by Law: Unfunded Grade R Entangles Grade R Providers in Regulatory Webs <i>Tarryn Cooper-Bell, Katherine Sutherland & Daniel Peter Al-Naddaf - Equal Education Law Centre</i>	Sowing Seeds of Change: A Farm-Based ECD Model for Rural Transformation in South Africa <i>Denver Swanepoel - ZIFUMANE Foundation</i>	Redefining Foundational Learning and Pedagogical Leadership Through a Complexity-Informed Lens in Disadvantaged ECCE Contexts <i>Dr Ayesha Carrim - UNISA</i>	Virtuous Hope, Responsive Care, and Early Learning: Findings from the iThemba Home-based ECD Programme <i>Lidia Matabaro - iThemba Projects</i>	Measuring Practitioner Support for Self-sustained Engagement for Four- to Five-year-olds in South Africa: A Study of the Use of LEGO PLAY 2.0 Classroom Observation Tools <i>Nkhensani Baloyi & Roseisha Ishwardutt - JET Education Services & The Unlimited Child</i>																			
13h00	Lunch																							

DAY 2	Main Room	Belgravia Minor Hall	Room 17/18	Room 19/20	Room 57
14h00	Strategic Litigation as Enabling Jurisprudence: Advancing the Right to Early Childhood Development Fanelesibonge Philasande Ndebele, Sheniece Linderboom & Kiara Govender - Legal Resources Centre (LRC)	Rooted and Resilient: Leadership, Networks, and Sustainability in Knysna's ECD Centres Judy-Marie van Noordwyk - Knysna Education Trust	Strengthening ECD Service Delivery on the Ground: The Power of Partnership Linda Biersteker, Jabu Mthembu-Dlamini & Leigh Morrison	Let's Play: Sparking Learning Magic Linda Smith - Care for Education	Digital Injustice in the Early Years: Historicising the Digital Divide and Mapping Equitable Futures in Marginalised ECD Contexts Enock Mapuranga - University of South Africa
15h00	Strengthening Financial Sustainability in Rural ECD Settings through Capacity Building and Mentorship: A Case Study from the Eastern Cape Thandile Ntshwanti - Ntshwanti Consulting	Beyond Outcomes: Cultivating Creative and Critical Thinkers Lisa Wingham - ORT SA CAPE	Space Design and Learning: Creating an Inclusive Environment for the Young Child (1/12 - 6 Years) Hawa Tayob - Montessori Early Learning Foundation (MELF)	From Monolingual Policy to Multilingual Practice: Rethinking Language Use in Early Mathematics Education Tholisa Matheza - Schools Development Unit	Empowering Parents, Enriching Childhoods: Strengthening Partnerships in Early Learning through the Families4Children Project Julie Hay - Singakwenza Early Childhood Education & Suzanne Clulow - Families4Children
16h00	Plenary Discussion: Let's Talk ECD Budget: Exploring Public and Private Investment in Early Childhood Development in South Africa Daniel Peter Al-Naddaf, Legal Researcher Admitted Attorney - Equal Education Law Centre; Malusi Ntoyapi, Programmes and Innovation Manager - HCI Foundation; Giuliana Bland, Director- Jim Joel Fund & Daniel McLaren, Public Finance Economist - Ilifa Labantwa. Facilitator: Yusrah Ehrenreich, CECD				
17h00	Networking, Exhibition walk through - Tea/Coffee				

Day 3: Thursday, 2 October 2025

DAY 3		Main Room	
08h50	Day 3 Welcome		
09h00	Panel Discussion: Laying the Foundation: 30 Years of Building Early Literacy and Language in South Africa Dr Xolisa Guzula, Senior Lecturer in Applied Language and Literacy Studies - University of Cape Town; Prof Carole Bloch, Extraordinary Professor in Language Education - University of the Western Cape; Nonikiwe Mashologu - Founder of Bini Birdies; Dr Shelley O'Carroll - Early Literacy Specialist. Facilitator: Jessica Blom, CECD		
10h30	Networking, Exhibition walk through - Mid Morning Tea		
	Main Room	Belgravia Minor Hall	Room 17/18
11h00	Evaluating the Cognitive, Social and Motor Skill Development of Pre-school Children through Duplo Block Play in Day-care Centres Mlungisi Nyamane - Osizweni Science Centre	Scaling quality early learning: New evidence on home and community-based programmes as a pragmatic strategy for access to quality early learning and development Justine Jowell - SmartStart Early Learning	
12h00	Inclusion Matters - A Study of Chaeli Cottage, a Fully Inclusive ECD Centre, Where Disabled and Non-disabled Children Play and Learn Together Debbie Prudhomme & Rosemary Luger - Chaeli Campaign	Pre-service teachers' experiences of using play-based pedagogy to incorporate Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Early Childhood Education classrooms Seyuri Naidoo - STADIO Higher Education	

Day 3: Thursday, 2 October 2025

Lunch				
13h00	Main Room	Belgravia Minor Hall	Room 17/18	Room 19/20
14h00	Closing the Quality Gap: A Scalable Model for Data-Driven ECD Improvement and Advocacy Nazley Giquel & Bokamoso Action Mohokare - The Unlimited Child	The Cost of Care: Payment Delays and Socioeconomic Pressures Facing ECD Practitioners in South Africa Matshidiso Sello - Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg	Mobilising Parents as Partners in Early Learning: A Practical Approach through the Starting Chance Parent Support Programme Bulelani Futshane - Starting Chance	Creating Neurodiversity-affirming Spaces: the Role of Social Interactive Environment and Practitioner Beliefs in Early Years Seipati Baloyi-Mothibeli - University of the Free State
15h00	Conference closure Eric Atmore, CECD			

Panel Discussion: Gauging Progress and Advancing Early Childhood Development



Panellists



Wiedaad Slemming is the Director of the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town (UCT), and an Associate Professor in the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health at UCT. She is an experienced health professional, academic and researcher, with over 20 years of experience working in a variety of settings in South Africa and abroad. She is a recognised child health, early childhood development (ECD) and child disability researcher, and currently serves on several international and national child health, nutrition, ECD and disability technical and advisory groups.



Linda Biersteker is a psychologist and adult educator focusing on early childhood development. Previously the Research Director at the Early Learning Resource Unit, she has extensive research, policy and programming experience in South Africa and the African region. Linda's particular interest is in good quality, effective and sustainable interventions targeting vulnerable young children and their parents and teachers, and her technical expertise guided the development of the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) suite of tools for early learning programmes and the Quality Assessment and Support System for the Department of Basic Education.



Mastoera Sadan is a Social Policy Analyst who has worked at a senior management level in the national government of South Africa for the past 20 years, first in the Presidency and then in the National Planning Commission, in the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME). Currently she is the Chief Sector Expert: Social, in the National Planning Commission (NPC) Secretariat, DPME. Her areas of expertise are in social policy (social assistance and early childhood development), and poverty and inequality. She holds an MSc in Social Policy and Planning from the London School of Economics and was a Visiting Scholar at the University of Oxford in 2002.



Tatenda Mawoyo is a Researcher at the Institute for Life Course Health Research at Stellenbosch University. He is a PhD candidate exploring how school climate shapes adolescent mental health. Before this, he worked as a social worker at The Trauma Centre for Violence and Torture for four years and then with the youth development organisation – Life Choices – for another four years. His research interests include early childhood development, parenting, adolescent mental health, and sexual and reproductive health.

Facilitator

Lori Lake is a Communications and Education Specialist at the Children's Institute (CI) at the University of Cape Town, where she plays a central role in the production of the annual *South African Child Gauge* and convenes the CI's child rights courses for health and allied professionals. She specialises in making complex ideas accessible to a wider audience and is interested in engaged scholarship that harnesses the power and resources of the university to promote children's rights, survival and optimal development.



Quality Early Childhood Development in South Africa: Celebrating three decades of ECD in South Africa

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future



Conference Keynote Speaker

Dr Imtiaz Sooliman

Founder and Chairman of
Gift of the Givers Foundation

Dr Sooliman is one of the world's most influential humanitarian leaders. His journey from private medical practice to the helm of Africa's largest disaster response NGO shows what is possible when compassion meets action. Under his leadership Gift of the Givers has:

- Delivered over R6 billion in aid across 47 countries.
- Pioneered medical innovations such as the world's first containerised mobile hospital.
- Responded to global crises, including providing assistance to 210 hospitals during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Implemented 21 categories of humanitarian and development projects.
- Earned over 200 awards, including 10 honorary doctorates and national honours.

His work champions practical support, deep empathy, and unwavering commitment to human dignity, importantly including children, whose well-being forms part of his mission.

ABSTRACTS

Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Sarah Atmore (Project Manager) - Centre for Early Childhood Development

Building on purpose: A walk through an ECD infrastructure project in an informal settlement

Typically when one does an infrastructure upgrade or new build for an early childhood development centre one wants to build with planning permission, but for early childhood development (ECD) centres in informal settlements that is not always possible. This presentation takes a brief look at the example of Makhulu's Daycare in the Sea Vista informal settlement in Saint Francis Bay, outlining the considerations that were made when deciding to do this particular infrastructure upgrade and highlighting the purpose that informed decisions each step of the way.

Dorette Louw (Director of Programmes and Operations) - Book Dash

Read & Play at Home - The power of partnerships in parent engagement

This six-minute presentation in the Khawuleza event will explore the power of partnerships in a best-practice model for parent engagement.

The talk will introduce the Read and Play at Home project funded by MySchool, as well as the partners and their roles. These are: Book Dash printed three home language books per child, The Do More Foundation commissioned ITEC to develop Read and Play at Home parent booklets (originally conceptualised by NECDA with activities for parents) based on the three Book Dash books, and implementation partners like Lulamaphiko used the booklets and the books to run parent workshops and increase parent engagement. The value of the partnership, as well as lessons learnt, will round out the presentation.

ABSTRACTS Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Peter Schutte - DGMT / ECD Connect

ECD Connect - the helpful assistant

We will introduce the audience in a fun and playful way to “ECD Connect” a customisable digital tool designed to equip practitioners and organisations to scale the delivery of professional, high-quality early childhood development (ECD) services. The tool is freely available to the South African public as of April 2025. The standout feature of ECD Connect is its user centred design and simplicity. We will showcase its potential for positively shaping the future of the ECD landscape and helping achieve universal access in the coming years.

Marion Wagner (CEO) - Breadline Africa

From Pit Toilets to Progress: How Safe Sanitation is Transforming ECD Learning Environments

Undignified and unsafe sanitation continues to pose serious risks to the health, safety, and participation of young children in early learning environments. In response, Breadline Africa has implemented a sanitation programme that replaces hazardous toilet structures in ECD centres with age-appropriate, child-friendly alternatives. These new facilities include handwashing stations and have been introduced in centres across the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Limpopo – areas often disconnected from municipal services.

This work is complemented by large-scale interventions in 29 primary and high schools, many of which serve Grade R learners. A total of 726 safe toilet units have replaced 464 pit toilets, reaching over 13,869 learners and staff. Midline findings from 13 participating schools indicate a dramatic transformation in learner experience and wellbeing:

- 100% reported improved hygiene, safety, and access,
- 94% of learners now feel safe using the toilets,
- 89% report better concentration, and
- 88% feel more motivated to attend school.

Safe sanitation is not only a health imperative but a critical enabler of dignity, equity, and school readiness. For young learners to thrive, access to clean, secure toilets must be prioritised as part of the foundation of a future-focused early learning system.

ABSTRACTS Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Heléne Brand (National Marketing Manager) - Grow ECD

Tech That Works For ECD: Scaling Quality, Not Just Content

“There’s an app for that.” The Grow ECD App is now South Africa’s most widely used ECD mobile platform, with over 6,500 centre owners and teachers actively engaging with this free tool. But this isn’t a tech-for-tech’s-sake solution. It’s a sector empowerment platform designed with (and for) the realities of early childhood education in under-resourced communities.

“The app is like having my school in my pocket.” Data-free training content, business and education resources, administration and financial management tools, learner observations and assessments, a step-by-step media-rich curriculum, registration tools, and a community of support. It combines practicality with dignity and it’s reaching centres that care for over 100 000 learners every month.

In this talk, we’ll share what we’ve learned building South Africa’s largest free ECD ecosystem:

1. Why user trust beats flashy features
 2. Why tech alone doesn’t work (the need for human-centric support)
 3. How we balance access and quality at scale
 4. Why collaboration (not competition) is what makes the platform powerful
 5. What’s next for the app (future developments)
-

ABSTRACTS Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Mmasoki Margaret Letsoalo (Director) - Golang-Kulani Early Learning Centre

Best Practice Model in ECD - ECD High/Scope

ECD High/Scope – is a way of working with children based on the belief that children learn best from activities which they plan and carry out themselves and then reflect upon the experience – the unique plan-do-review process. An approach underpinned by research, the internationally accredited High/Scope Perry Pre-School Longitudinal Study indicates that children who had High/Scope experience developed life skills and positive attitudes to education and society, which enabled them to improve the quality of their lives as adolescents and adults.

How does High/Scope work? Adult-Child Learning, The Learning Environment, Daily Routine, Observations and Recording. Quality Courses - A High/Scope setting will exhibit all the identified criteria of a quality curriculum: a developmentally appropriate curriculum, support for curriculum development, parent inclusion, developmentally appropriate assessment procedure, and a reasonable adult-child ratio.

Which children can benefit? All children can benefit from the High/Scope approach because it addresses both process and developmentally appropriate content. High/Scope is used in over twenty countries around the world in a wide variety of settings and is known to benefit: children across cultural backgrounds, children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, children with special needs, normally developing and gifted children.

What are the benefits? Children with High/Scope experience become: independent, responsible and confident. They learn to plan their own activities, carry them out and review them, become problem solvers, decision makers and active participants in their own learning, gain knowledge and skills in all the key curriculum areas. Evident photos will be attached.

ABSTRACTS Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Rebecca Wakeford (Director: Programmes) - Midlands Community College, & Ruby Motaung - TREE / Sivulithuba Collaboration

From Level 4 to Diploma: A Bridge to ECD Success

How do we ensure that passionate, experienced early childhood development (ECD) practitioners – often without access to further study – can thrive in higher education and uplift their practice? The Sivulithuba Tertiary Preparation Programme offers a compelling answer.

This short presentation shares key outcomes from a bridging programme that prepared 50 South African ECD practitioners with NQF Level 4 qualifications to enter the Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education at UNISA. The programme combined digital skills training, academic preparation, and mentorship to close the gap between practical experience and academic readiness.

Over just a few months, participants – many of whom had never used a computer – learned to navigate online platforms, structure academic assignments, reflect on their teaching, and manage the demands of distance education. Despite facing barriers like poor connectivity and limited resources, all 50 completed the programme, and every one of them was accepted into the Diploma, some through Recognition of Prior Learning.

The results speak for themselves: more confident, skilled, and connected practitioners who are now role models in their communities. This is more than a bridging programme – it's a scalable model for professionalising the ECD workforce and making higher education truly accessible.

Let's rethink the "entry requirements" and invest in real pathways to quality ECD.

ABSTRACTS Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Cathy Gush (Projects Manager) - Lebone Centre

Step by Step on the ECD Ladder

This presentation will attempt to offer a snapshot of the different activities that make up the Lebone Centre's comprehensive pipeline of support for children aged zero to nine years in Makhanda (Grahamstown).

We believe that sustained support from pre-birth to Grade 3 for children in our community will result in children being able to read for meaning by Grade 4. We will give an overview of our baby programmes, our early learning programmes and our Foundation Phase programmes.

Chantel Fernandez (Publisher: Foundation Phase) - Maskew Miller Learning (MML)

Engaging the Senses Through Play: Unlocking Children's Potential Through Meaningful Experiences

Play is more than just a pastime – it is a vital, evidence-based tool for fostering early childhood development. This presentation explores the powerful intersection of play and sensory learning as a holistic approach to education. By engaging the senses – sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell – children can deepen their understanding of the world around them, enhancing cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth.

Drawing on current research and real-world examples, we will examine how sensory play supports attention, memory, language development, and creativity, particularly in early childhood and special education settings. The session will also delve into the science of sensory processing and its crucial role in brain development. Practical strategies for designing playful, sensory-rich environments will be shared, providing educators and caregivers with tools to intentionally support curiosity, collaboration, and lifelong learning.

ABSTRACTS Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Roxanne Robbins (Child Justice and Development Specialist) - Play with a Purpose Educational Trust

Early Childhood Development as a Crime Prevention Strategy in South Africa

What if the key to reducing South Africa's violent crime epidemic lies not in law enforcement but in the preschool classroom?

With a murder rate of approximately 42 per 100,000 people, South Africa ranks among the top 10 most violent countries in the world, nearly seven times the global average. In this context, prevention must start early, before harm occurs.

This research examines how early childhood development (ECD) can break intergenerational cycles of violence, a strategy still largely overlooked in national prevention frameworks and policy. Grounded in neuroscience and global evidence, it highlights the first five years as a critical period for shaping emotional regulation, moral reasoning, and pro-social behaviour.

Central to this approach is the Play with a Purpose programme, a neuroscience-informed, play-based model currently reaching tens of thousands of children in high-risk communities across South Africa and beyond.

This viewpoint challenges delegates to rethink crime prevention at its root. It makes a compelling case for embedding ECD in South Africa's safety strategies and calls on policymakers, educators, and civic leaders to reimagine public safety from the ground up, starting with our youngest citizens.

ABSTRACTS Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Tseli Scharer (Director) - Ntataise Lowveld

Playgroups an Equalizer

Accessible, affordable, all-inclusive early childhood development programme that warrants no frills, no icing, no decor. Just a safe, friendly and stimulating environment, skilled early learning facilitators, and child and age-appropriate educational resources.

Young children under the age of five are going through a stage of rapid brain and skill development. To optimise this growth, they need a stimulating environment to play and learn.

This begs the question, what of young children who, for various reasons including financial, proximity and accessibility, cannot afford to attend a formal ECD centre?

There is an answer. The Playgroup.

An all-inclusive, affordable, fun-filled equitable solution which assists young children to become ready for formal school/big school.

It is with a sense of awe and excitement that a young child relays to the primary caregiver how she built a tall tower that did not fall. How she put all the pieces of the puzzle together and formed a complete picture, just like the one on the box. How she mixed paint colours to draw a masterpiece of art. How she could sort different colours and match shapes. How she played and cheered on her friends as they cooked supper at the make-believe corner and had a ball laughing at others dressed up as Gogos and doctors. How she danced while waiting her turn and of course how she was able to tell who the villain and the hero were and predicted the ending of the story.

This beautiful, picturesque context is a Playgroup. Anywhere, anytime is play time. Learning Through Play.

It is possible, the future of our untapped natural resources, South African children are within our reach.

"There can be no keener revelation of a society than the way in which it treats its children." - Nelson Mandela, 8 May 1995.

ABSTRACTS Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Jonathan Hoffenberg (Programmes Manager) - The Parent Centre

A Call to Action: Supporting Fathers in Early Childhood Development

The Parent Centre, Wynberg

The Parent Centre is a 40-plus-year-old family support organisation providing parenting resources, guidance, and community support to South African families across the Western Cape. Through programmes including Parent Infant home visits, Teen Parenting support, Parent Counselling, Co-Parenting counselling, and Fatherhood courses, we strengthen family relationships and support positive parenting practices.

The Challenge

The 2024 State of South African Fathers report reveals that most South African children do not live with their biological fathers. This reality creates complex emotional landscapes within ECD settings. Many mothers carry hurt or protective instincts regarding fathers based on personal experiences, while ECD environments have traditionally been mother-focused spaces where fathers often feel unwelcome or uncertain of their role. Institutional practices, from school forms to events, frequently default to maternal contact, inadvertently excluding fathers.

The Opportunity

ECD centres are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between fathers and children during crucial developmental years. They can model inclusive practices that welcome all caregivers, support mothers in recognizing the benefits of positive father involvement and create safe spaces for fathers to learn and engage without judgment.

The Call to Action

ECD workers and managers must navigate this sensitively by acknowledging and reflecting on staff's mixed feelings about fathers and the lived experiences of gender-based violence. This requires training staff to engage fathers respectfully, adapting policies to welcome diverse family structures, and supporting both parents in developing positive co-parenting relationships.

The goal is transforming ECD spaces from mother-centred to family-centred environments, recognizing that children thrive when all loving caregivers are supported and included.

ABSTRACTS Day 1: 'Khawuleza' Event

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Bulumko Woji (Ndinogona Facilitator) - Shonaquip Social Enterprise

Inclusion of Children with Disabilities - Challenges & Possibilities

Background

Play is how children learn about themselves and their world. Children with disabilities are often excluded from play opportunities so it is vital that ECD (early childhood development) centres are inclusive of all children.

Method

Shonaquip Social Enterprise's Ndinogona programme trains caregivers and ECD practitioners to promote play and learning for all children, including those with disabilities and to adapt activities to meet a child's needs. The growth of the programme since its initial implementation was explored through written reflections and semi-structured interviews with programme facilitators.

Results

The challenge of a pandemic resulted in hybrid learning options which expanded participation to a broader audience. Including parents empowers them to meet their children's play needs. Flexible facilitators were highlighted as important to running this programme in a contextually responsive way.

Conclusion

Challenges and possibilities come with implementing such training. Inclusion goes beyond enrolment of children with disabilities in ECD centres, it involves creating comprehensive support networks that enable every child access to play and learning.

Amanda Mbali (Community Engagement Officer) - Centre for Early Childhood Development

When Research Becomes a Tool for Justice

At CECD, active participation in Early Childhood Development (ECD) forum meetings is a central strategy for building strong relationships, deepening sector understanding, and ensuring interventions are informed and contextually relevant. This engagement grounds our work in lived realities, guiding collaboration with government and ensuring solutions address actual needs.

As both a practitioner and a student, I have observed how conventional research often extracts data without returning value to communities – a practice that is ethically flawed. Action research, by contrast, prioritises reciprocity, continuous feedback, and co-creation of solutions, ensuring research benefits those it studies.

Our unit's community engagement is rooted in trust, cultural understanding, and transparency. We meet forums where they are, listen actively, and maintain open communication – returning to share findings whether outcomes are positive or not. This approach reinforces respect, fosters inclusion, and strengthens collaborative problem-solving.

Our work is guided by the needs and priorities identified by the ECD sector itself. We do not operate on assumptions; we listen, learn, and act with urgency to create practical, solution-driven change.

Action-oriented research is essential: data alone cannot address injustice – research must lead to action. In South Africa and across Africa, communities have too often been used as case studies without benefit to them, with researchers gaining credentials while local realities remain unchanged. This extractive model must be replaced with ethical, accountable practices that centre community participation.

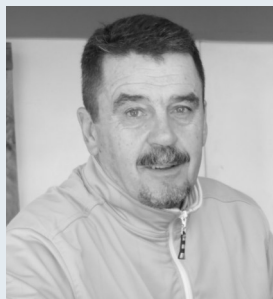
Bridging the gap between research and implementation requires involving communities as partners, creating accessible feedback loops, translating findings into practical tools, and fostering partnerships between academia, non-governmental organisations, and practitioners. Funding must support the entire cycle – from research to piloting and scaling solutions. Embedding reflective, evidence-based practice within ECD work can transform research into a responsive, living tool for change – rooted in the aspirations and everyday realities of the sector.



Panel Discussion: The Role of Local Government in Advancing Quality ECD in South Africa



Panellists



Abé du Plessis holds a Bachelor's degree and Higher Education Diploma from the University of Stellenbosch, an Honours degree in Industrial Psychology from UNISA, and a Master in Public Management from University of the Western Cape. He has over three decades of experience working in local government, with responsibilities ranging from human resources to integrated development planning, public participation, and community development, including ECD, youth, and vulnerable groups. Abé played a key part in Saldanha Bay Municipality's (SBM) first ECD Conference in 2019. He was also instrumental in sustaining a Whole of Society Approach project that was initiated by the Western Cape Government. Since 2024, Abé has been working with the Western Cape Department of the Premier to implement the Community Capacity Enhancement programme in SBM.



Dr Ruben Richards is a distinguished South African leader, academic, author, and advocate for justice and reconciliation. His career spans civil society, international diplomacy, higher education, and local governance. He served as founding Deputy Director-General of the Scorpions and later as Executive Secretary of the Human Rights Violation Committee of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. More recently, Dr Richards established a community organisation that participated in the 2021 local government elections and became Executive Mayor of the Cederberg Local Municipality. His leadership has focused on community inclusion and sustainable development. In 2012, he founded the Ruben Richards Foundation, a non-profit and public benefit organisation committed to fostering healing and peace in traumatised communities affected by gang-related violence. The Foundation currently supplies 2500 meals each month to ECD centres across the Cederberg.



Councillor Francine Higham holds a Bachelor of Journalism from Rhodes University and has extensive experience in the communications and digital industries. She has been Media Liaison Officer to the Minister of Finance and Economic Opportunities in the Western Cape Government, and is the councillor for the City of Cape Town's Ward 77. She also served on the Portfolio Committee for Community Services and Health before being appointed as the Mayoral Committee Member. Passionate about improving service delivery, Councillor Higham focuses on innovative solutions in areas such as homelessness, social upliftment, youth development, environmental protection, and the maintenance of public spaces.



Ntjantja Ned was born in the village of Masoleng in Matatiele, the fourth of six siblings. Her childhood, walking to school and playing on dusty roads, taught her the value of community, perseverance, and belonging. She trained as a social worker, and has spent decades working across government, civil society, and international agencies in support of women, children, and rural communities. Her leadership roles have included Hollard Foundation Trust CEO (now Trustee), Head of Social Policy at UNICEF South Africa, and Deputy Director General for the Department of Social Development. Today, she works as an independent consultant and board trustee, and leads Masoleng Rising, a community rooted organisation she co-founded in 2023. Its work centres on rebuilding the role of parents and community in raising children. Ntjantja now focuses on growing early childhood programmes led by young local women. Her work remains deeply personal and grounded in care.

Facilitator

Yusrah Ehrenreich obtained a Bachelor of Social Sciences degree majoring in Political Studies and Economics from the University of Cape Town in 2012 and completed a Post-graduate LLB degree in 2015 at the same university. Yusrah completed her articles and practised as an attorney at Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr, where she gained experience in corporate and commercial law specialising in mergers and acquisitions with JSE-listed companies, competition law, constitutional and administrative law, and public law litigation. She joined the Centre for Early Childhood Development in 2020 to head up its legal, advocacy and social justice work. She is a consultant for Van Wyk and Associates and also sits on the board of The Helix Collective NPC, founded to address the need for urgent practical financial support for early learning and nutrition to children in South Africa.



ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Tessa Browne (Co-founder and Reggio Coordinator) - Africa Reggio Emilia Alliance (NPC)

Listening as learning: Fully attuned in the Reggio Emilia approach

A brief outline of the Reggio Emilia approach introduces the presentation. It was birthed in early childhood education in Reggio Emilia, Italy after World War II. This approach views children as rich in potential, as capable, creative, curious citizens from birth. It recognises children's many ways of making meaning, offering them opportunities to communicate through expressive media. It emphasises the participatory and relational aspect of learning and of the environment's potential to stimulate and enrich learning.

Listening with your whole body, with all your senses, is a core principle of the Reggio Emilia approach. Listening is essential to learning. Listening to yourself, to others, to materials, to the world around you. Listening to understand, to make meaning, to discover, to reflect, to reason. In a listening environment, children are attuned to themselves, to their thoughts, to materials and to each other.

The act of a teacher listening attentively to children disrupts traditional ideas of schooling. Listening to children's meaning-making, their understanding of life and the world, as well as their theories and actions. Listening to investigate children's learning processes, to make these visible, to plan further research. Listening for moments of wonder and beauty.

This presentation shows many forms of listening in South Africa's Reggio Emilia inspired schools. Teachers' photos and documentation reflect the value of listening attentively to children, revealing their capabilities and keen interest in their world. They show how a listening environment enables both teachers and children to relaunch, re-think and re-visit ideas, promoting a meta-cognitive awareness. The documentation also reveals children's growing self-confidence, articulacy and language competencies in response to being heard. Finally, it advocates for listening to rediscover children's pleasure in learning.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Mary Venter (Executive Director) & Rene King - Khululeka Community Education Development Centre

Cascading Competence and Capacity in Home-based ECD Programmes

Capacity building is a foundational investment in the country's social and economic future. It has the potential to enhance the quality and reach of early childhood development (ECD) services and it supports professional development. The Khululeka ECD@HOME Package of Programmes and Practices, which aims to strengthen the capacity of local providers to bridge the gaps in service provision, is rooted in competence and capacity building. It is an approach that endeavours to ensure that parents, caregivers, programme managers, trainers and organisations have the skills, knowledge and tools to deliver high-quality, developmentally appropriate care and education of young children in their homes. It is the means by which to:

- Localise Development.
- Nurturing community ownership and reducing dependence on external actors.
- Foster Sustainable Impact.
- Ensuring that initiatives can continue beyond the lifespan of a specific project.
- Strengthen Partnerships.
- Collaborating with local stakeholders to facilitate holistic development.
- Increase Accountability.
- Enabling implementers to manage resources and deliver measurable outcomes.

For non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in South Africa, where resource constraints and developmental challenges are acute, this approach offers a gateway to transformation. This presentation sets out how the multiple benefits of building competence and capacity can be absorbed into a Human Resource Development Plan as well as an Organisational Succession Plan. These include:

- Enhanced Performance.
- Clear competence frameworks for employees who are evaluated against specific performance indicators, raising overall productivity.
- Motivation and Retention
- Structured capacity building which increases job satisfaction and reduces turnover.
- Future-readiness.
- A succession plan which ensures that future leaders are enabled.
- Sustainability.
- Retention of Institutional knowledge and resilient systems.
- Strategic Alignment.
- Aligning individual competence development with organisational goals which ensures cohesive and coordinated growth.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Jessica Blom (Deputy Director) - Centre for Early Childhood Development

Strengthening ECD Centres, Building Communities: Five Years of the Kouga ECD Project

This conference presentation provides an overview of the Kouga ECD Project's activities, impact, and key lessons from its five-year implementation. The project aimed to improve young children's access to high-quality early childhood development (ECD) services in marginalised areas of the Eastern Cape by strengthening ECD centres.

Using a comprehensive, integrated approach, the project worked with all the ECD centres in a specific area. Activities focused on improving centre functioning and enhancing early learning programmes through professional development training for ECD staff, establishing a team of local ECD facilitators, leadership training for principals and governing bodies, provision of fire, safety and health equipment, registration support, mentoring, educational resources, infrastructure upgrades, access to nutrition programmes, and building an ECD community.

A particularly successful and sustainable element of the project has been the establishment of ECD forums and the intentional transfer of knowledge and leadership to these local structures, alongside the development of local ECD facilitators. Facilitators have played a central role in mentoring and supporting ECD centres, reinforcing learning and addressing challenges in real time. Together, forums and facilitators have become vital mechanisms for peer support, knowledge sharing, and advocacy, embedding the project within the community and ensuring its continuity.

With the project now nearing completion, this paper reflects on the journey and what has worked well. Findings from baseline and follow-up assessments highlight major improvements in the quality and functioning of ECD centres. The project shows that long-term, in-depth support can lead to sustained, meaningful change, strengthening both individual centres and the broader ECD ecosystem through community-led structures.

Ultimately, the Kouga ECD Project illustrates that investing in both systems and people, and fostering local ownership, is key to building a strong, resilient ECD sector that serves young children and their communities well into the future.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Arina Kitching (Director) - Learn2Live Community Centre

Understanding Trauma in the ECD Space: Why Safety Comes Before Learning

The 16th issue of the South African Child Gauge highlights that only 1 in 10 children with a diagnosable and treatable mental health issue in South Africa receives care. This reveals a serious gap in mental health services, especially in low-income communities.

In these settings, many young children enter early childhood development (ECD) carrying the invisible burden of trauma. This presentation explores how trauma affects brain development and learning, emphasising the need for trauma-sensitive classrooms as part of a wider response to the mental health crisis.

Using insights from brain science, the session explains how trauma can keep children in a constant state of survival, impairing their ability to regulate emotions, concentrate, or engage socially. Behaviours such as aggression, withdrawal, or defiance are reinterpreted as stress responses rather than misconduct.

The presentation equips educators with practical strategies to create emotionally safe, nurturing, and predictable classrooms. Participants will learn how consistent routines, co-regulation, and empathetic teacher-child relationships help children feel safe enough to learn. The role of the educator as a “safe adult” who provides connection and calm is central to the approach.

Case studies from under-resourced ECD centres in South Africa demonstrate how trauma-informed strategies can be adapted to low-cost, high-adversity environments. Even in informal settings, small changes in classroom culture and adult response can significantly impact a child’s well-being and development.

This session is ideal for educators, ECD practitioners, and child advocates working in marginalised communities. It offers tools to foster healing, build resilience, and create spaces where every child is seen, supported, and ready to learn.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Tatiana Kazim (Research Associate) - Centre for Law and Society, University of Cape Town,
& Tshepo Mantje

Recognising a Constitutional Right to ECD in South Africa

The South African Constitution explicitly recognises and protects a range of children's rights, including a child's right to family or parental care; shelter; basic nutrition; basic health services; social services; and basic education. In addition, the best interests of the child must be considered paramount in every matter concerning them. Despite this array of child-specific rights, the Constitution does not explicitly articulate the right to early childhood development, holistically understood. Does this mean that children simply do not have such a right in this country? No. In our presentation, we demonstrate how a holistic conception of the right to early childhood development can and should be recognised under South Africa's constitutional framework.

Our approach involves interpreting a range of different Constitutional rights in light of international law. This allows us to articulate both an overarching right to early childhood development, and specific rights to different components of holistic development, such as early learning opportunities, nutrition, and responsive caregiving. A useful analogy here is an umbrella: our approach recognises both the canopy (the overarching right to early childhood development) and each of the individual spokes (the component rights and corresponding duties). The canopy is important, because it ensures that the connections between rights are recognised and also facilitates the recognition of aspects of early childhood development that do not map neatly onto existing rights (such as rest, leisure, play). The spokes are important, because they are clear and specific, allowing us to clearly articulate the relevant duties and identify appropriate duty-bearers, thus offering robust support for the canopy.

Our presentation will outline why the recognition of the holistic right to early childhood development is important; the different components of the right and the government duties relating to each component; and the implications of this approach for the future of the ECD sector.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Tarryn Cooper-Bell (Senior Attorney), Katherine Sutherland & Daniel Peter Al-Naddaf -
Equal Education Law Centre

Abandoned by Government, Trapped by Law: Unfunded Grade R Entangles Grade R Providers in Regulatory Webs

South Africa's failure to fund compulsory Grade R has created a constitutional and fiscal crisis. The policy journey of including Grade R as the first year of basic education spans three decades – from the 1994 South African Preschool Study Team recommendation, through 2001's Education White Paper 5, to 2024's legal entrenchment in the Basic Education Laws Amendment Act – demonstrating sustained policy commitment across multiple administrations, making current non-implementation inexcusable. Constitutional tensions are stark: Section 29(1)(a) guarantees the immediately realisable right to basic education, yet provinces who rely on national transfers for 97% of their funding must accommodate 200,000 additional Grade R learners without fiscal support. Government estimates implementation requires R17.2 billion – R12.4 billion for infrastructure across 10,412 schools lacking Grade R facilities, plus R5.3 billion for educator provisioning. Treasury explicitly labelled these costs an "unfunded mandate," refusing allocation across consecutive budgets while offering shifting justifications from conditional funding dependent on regulations to deferring costs until 2026. The dilemma is compounded by Grade R's unique position as a legal and institutional nexus between two distinct systems. Grade R is now offered across both Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres and schools, each governed by different legal frameworks. This creates regulatory complexity where the same educational service operates under divergent funding models, qualification requirements, and oversight mechanisms. ECD centres providing Grade R must maintain developmental approaches within basic education frameworks never designed with their operational realities in mind, while schools incorporating Grade R must bridge formal education structures with early learning and play pedagogies.

This presentation demonstrates how the Grade R implementation crisis extends beyond budgetary concerns to fundamentally challenge the coherence of South Africa's ECD framework. We argue understanding this context is essential for ECD policy, as it demonstrates how inadequate fiscal planning undermines rights delivery while creating complex regulatory challenges.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Denver Swanepoel (Chief Operating Officer) - ZIFUMANE Foundation

Sowing Seeds of Change: A Farm-Based ECD Model for Rural Transformation in South Africa

The Zifumane Foundation presents a replicable and context-responsive early childhood development (ECD) model designed specifically for rural farming communities in South Africa. Rooted in the belief that every child, regardless of geography or socio-economic status, deserves access to quality early education, this model addresses the unique challenges of children living on farms while leveraging the strengths of rural networks and agricultural rhythms.

In partnership with local churches, landowners, and community stakeholders, we are establishing nine ECD centres across working farms in the Western Cape. This initiative not only provides access to foundational learning for children aged 0–6 years, but also strengthens parenting skills, empowers women through vocational training, and cultivates local leadership within the ECD workforce.

Anchored in a rights-based and community-led approach, our model integrates best practices in ECD curriculum design, innovative funding solutions, and collaborative governance aligned with the evolving policy landscape – including the shift from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education. Baseline assessments and cognitive evaluations guide programme delivery, ensuring developmental milestones are met and that data informs continuous quality improvement.

Our presentation will share:

- Lessons learned from pilot sites and the early implementation phase
- Strategies for navigating ECD registration and compliance in rural settings
- Insights into sustainable funding through church-community partnerships
- Outcomes of initial monitoring and evaluation efforts.

As South Africa reflects on 30 years of ECD, the Zifumane Foundation offers a rural lens on the future – where even the most remote farm becomes fertile ground for lifelong learning, social justice, and hope.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Ayesha Carrim (Lecturer) - UNISA

Redefining Foundational Learning and Pedagogical Leadership Through a Complexity-Informed Lens in Disadvantaged ECCE Contexts

The entrenched inequalities in South Africa's education system experienced further setbacks during the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to be a concern in post-pandemic times. Foundational learning defined as the dynamic process through which young children make meaning of their worlds by drawing on interconnected emotional, social, physical, cognitive and cultural experiences (Wood, 2020, p. 3) and pedagogical leadership to support this, are increasingly topical within national learning recovery agendas (Fonsén et al., 2023).

A major issue that continues to be of concern is the persistent absence of meaningful, values-driven leadership support for ECCE teachers working in disadvantaged contexts.

The aim of this paper is to explore how ECCE teachers and pedagogical leaders understood and experienced leadership support in the aftermath of the pandemic, and whether any systemic changes followed the crisis.

The theoretical lens that informed the analysis was complexity theory, in combination with Africentric pedagogical leadership principles (Shockley, 2008). This theory allows for key attention to be paid to the unpredictable, adaptive and non-linear nature of educational leadership in volatile and uncertain contexts (Davis & Sumara, 2006).

The study took place across three primary school sites in the Tshwane District: an urban private school, an urban public school and a rural public school. While the research focused on the full Foundation Phase (Grades R–3), this paper highlights how learning lost in Grade R during 2020 continued to affect learners in the years that followed. By 2024, teachers were still dealing with the impact. A qualitative approach was used, with ECCE teachers who also positioned themselves as pedagogical leaders participating in the study. They were selected using purposive sampling.

The findings show that to redefine foundational learning, the following needs to be taken into account: the relational, context-sensitive realities of teaching; the emotional labour of ECCE work; and the need for leadership that listens and adapts, rather than merely enforces compliance.

Complementary to the above, pedagogical leadership needs to remain flexible, empathetic and deeply responsive to teachers' lived experiences particularly in contexts marked by post-pandemic fatigue, resource scarcity and systemic neglect.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

In light of the above, this study has implications for teacher professional development on the understandings of foundational learning and pedagogical leadership as interlinked levers to advance early learning. This is not isolated from the care aspect, given the impact of the pandemic and other vulnerabilities that continue to affect young children. Hence, I advocate for professional development to be framed in a holistic way, which the findings show as being grounded in emotional support, contextual awareness and sustained collaborative leadership.

References:

Davis, B., & Sumara, D. (2006). *Complexity and Education: Inquiries into Learning, Teaching, and Research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Fonsén, E., Szecsi, T., Kupila, P., Liinamaa, T., Halpern, C., & Repo, M. (2023). Teachers' pedagogical leadership in early childhood education. *Educational Research*, 65(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2147855>

Shockley, K. G. (2008). Africentric education leadership: Theory and practice. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership*, 3(3), 1–12. <https://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/download/86/40>

Wood, E. (2020). Learning, development and the early childhood curriculum: A critical discourse analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(1), 21–40. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3570>

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Lidia Matabaro - iThemba Projects

Virtuous Hope, Responsive Care, and Early Learning: Findings from the iThemba home-based ECD Programme

In Sweetwaters, South Africa, a community facing significant challenges – including a high prevalence of HIV among infants and over 80% of children lacking home language books, the iThemba home-based ECD programme implements a relationship-centred home-visiting model. Over a two-year study conducted with research partners at Hope College, United States, this programme mentored parents and caregivers of children aged 0-5 years, focusing on reading, play, and responsive caregiving, while equipping homes with vital learning materials. Mentors conducted biweekly visits, engaging children and exchanging materials, alongside structured observational assessments of the home learning environment and parental responsiveness, as well as caregiver self-reports on virtuous hope, social support, and adversity.

Baseline assessments revealed that parents who self-reported higher on virtuous hope had higher observational scores of parental responsiveness, parental emotion reminiscing, and a higher quality of the home learning environment. Furthermore, young children's emotion identification abilities correlated positively with parental hope at baseline.

Analysis comparing the first six months of the intervention group (n=290) with a delayed control group (n=79) in a neighbouring district showed significant improvements in early learning play and responsiveness within the intervention group. Crucially, parental responsiveness emerged as a positive predictor of virtuous hope approximately six months later.

Analysis of data from across two years found that consistent monthly visits paired with consistent caregiver reading and playing and programme engagement meaningfully improved caregiver emotional responsiveness and the quality of the home environment. Caregiver hope and social support both enhanced the programme impact.

This study strongly indicates that the iThemba intervention effectively supports families in establishing foundational emotional and intellectual well-being for children, even within highly adverse contexts.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Nkhensani Baloyi (ECD Research Officer) & Roseisha Ishwardutt - JET Education Services and The Unlimited Child

Measuring practitioner support for self-sustained engagement for four- to five-year-olds in South Africa: A study of the use of LEGO PLAY 2.0 classroom observation tools

This study explores the relationship between classroom observation data and the practices that promote self-sustained engagement among four- to five-year-olds in South Africa. Using the LEGO PLAY 2.0 classroom observation tool, we assess four key dimensions of engagement: agency, exploration, personal and social connection, and a positive emotional climate. Data was collected from 150 classrooms in under-resourced communities in KwaZulu-Natal. The study investigates how these constructs are linked to practitioner practices, children's engagement, and classroom management.

Findings aim to inform improvements in programme design, particularly by enhancing practitioner training in play-based pedagogy. The study's outcomes have the potential to significantly strengthen early childhood education (ECE), especially in disadvantaged areas, by equipping practitioners with strategies to foster deeper engagement and support self-directed learning in young children.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Fanelesibonge Philasande Ndebele (Candidate Attorney), Sheniece Linderboom (Attorney) & Kiara Govender (Attorney) - Legal Resources Centre (LRC)

Strategic Litigation as Enabling Jurisprudence: Advancing the Right to Early Childhood Development (ECD)

The presentation will examine the use of strategic litigation as a tool for constitutional recognition of early childhood development (ECD), as well as the advancement of social justice within the ECD sector in South Africa. The presentation will specifically focus on *Friends of South Africa ECD Forum and Others v MEC for Education: KwaZulu-Natal and Others*, a constitutional and legal challenge that has been brought by the Legal Resources Centre (LRC), on behalf of ECD stakeholders, against the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (KZNDoE) for its persistent failure to pay subsidies owed to registered ECD centres, despite binding Transfer Payment Agreements. The LRC argues that this failure constitutes a breach of the KZNDoE's constitutional, statutory and contractual obligations, and systemically obstructs access to quality ECD, particularly for children in poor and marginalised communities.

Using the Constitutional Court's decision in *Governing Body of the Juma Musjid Primary School v Essay NO and Others* 2011 (8) BCLR 761 (CC) ("Juma Musjid") as an anchor, the presentation will draw a parallel between the legal recognition of the right to basic education and the currently unrecognised right to ECD. Juma Musjid entrenched the right to basic education as immediately realisable, and paved the way for a series of cases that have given meaning and context to the right. Similarly, the LRC's subsidy case seeks to establish ECD as a stand-alone, self-executing right that is legally enforceable against the state, and would serve as an enabler for broader ECD rights and jurisprudence, including, inter alia, claims related to budgeting, infrastructure, quality standards, support for ECD practitioners, and overall access.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Judy-Marie van Noordwyk (Managing Director) - Knysna Education Trust

Rooted and Resilient: Leadership, Networks, and Sustainability in Knysna's ECD Centres

In South Africa's fragmented early childhood development (ECD) system, the leadership of ECD principals remains a vital factor in sustaining programme quality. This paper, which will be prepared ahead of the conference, builds on insights from the Positive Deviance Initiative and draws on implementation experience from the Knysna Education Trust (KET), which currently supports 67 ECD centres in Knysna. These centres vary significantly in longevity: 39% have been operating for 16 years or more, while 35% are under ten years old. This diversity presents a unique opportunity to explore how leadership and network participation shape centre resilience, community trust, and long-term viability in resource-constrained settings.

Drawing on interviews with principals from both established and emerging centres, and mapping their networking efforts, the paper will examine how ECD principals operate not only as managers but also as connectors and community advocates. It will also explore the enablers and barriers that shape their ability to build and maintain supportive networks.

By surfacing the everyday leadership practices of principals in Knysna, the paper aims to provide practical insights for those working to scale quality early learning through locally grounded, relationship-driven strategies. It argues that strengthening local ECD forums, recognising networked leadership as a key lever, and investing in leadership development are essential steps toward building more sustainable ECD systems.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Linda Biersteker, Jabu Mthembu-Dlamini & Leigh Morrison

Strengthening ECD Service Delivery on the Ground: The Power of Partnership

Effective delivery of the services needed to support the holistic development of young children. Ensuring that each child accesses what they need at different stages of development depends on the collaborative efforts of a wide range of stakeholders. The National Integrated Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy undertakes to partner with a wide range of responsible role players, from parents through departments across the different spheres of government to NGOs and the Private Sector. The 2030 ECD Strategy document is also explicit that its success will depend on collaboration in delivery, and promotes the concept of a Social Compact for ECD. The compact is a vehicle for collaboration across departments and spheres of government, but also and crucially, collaboration with social partners, business and donors, families and communities and the ECD workforce and NGOs. This importantly involves policy development from the bottom-up as well as the top-down. In this session we will look at the components of effective Collective Impact Models in ECD and present two case studies of effective local-level ECD partnerships. These are The Do More Foundation's Leave No Young Child Behind Initiative in rural Nkomazi, Mpumalanga and the ECD partnership approach used by True North to support young children in the diverse low-income urban community of Vrygrond, Cape Town. We will reflect on the successes and challenges and local differences, and how these can inform other local delivery models.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Linda Smith (Programmes Manager) - Care for Education

Let's Play: Sparking Learning Magic

ECD lays the foundation for lifelong learning, well-being, and social participation. Yet many children across South Africa and beyond still face systemic barriers that limit their access to quality ECD experiences, ranging from under-resourced centres, a lack of inclusive practices, and insufficient support for ECD practitioners. Addressing these challenges is not just a cause; it's a call to action to reimagine how we teach, nurture, and empower our youngest learners.

Our interactive session will respond to this call with playful, hands-on activities using the Six Bricks tool, alongside a presentation on how Care for Education (CFE) supports ECD by equipping teachers to develop critical foundational learning skills in inclusive, responsive, and developmentally appropriate ways.

Six Bricks is a tactile, play-based learning methodology that uses six colourful DUPLO bricks to teach a wide range of educational concepts. Designed to support every child, regardless of ability, background, or learning style, it engages kinaesthetic, visual, and auditory learners while fostering collaboration, peer support, and social connection. Activities are easily adaptable to suit individual learning needs and classroom contexts.

CFE has a rich library of teacher-guided activities that embrace a playful pedagogy rooted in neuroscience, child development theory, and constructivist approaches. These activities nurture the whole child: perceptual-motor, social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development, and promote creativity, curiosity, and resilience.

This session invites educators, practitioners and advocates to join the movement toward inclusive, high-quality, joyful early learning. All Six Bricks activities demonstrated are open-source and ready to be used in any setting. We'll also share powerful stories of transformation, where accessible tools have sparked not only measurable growth in young learners but also shifts in teacher confidence, motivation, and connection.

Join us in this experience to discover how going "back to the basics" can help us shape a stronger, more playful future for all children.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Enock Mapuranga (PhD Candidate) - University of South Africa

Digital Injustice in the Early Years: Historicising the Digital Divide and Mapping Equitable Futures in Marginalised ECD Contexts

The proliferation of modern technologies and the need to adopt digital technologies have significantly changed educational landscapes across different learning levels at the same time creating new opportunities and extending existing inequalities. Early childhood development (ECD) learners who historically endured scores of exclusions from both colonial and post-colonial policies and practices are now shouldering an additional burden of a digital divide. Research has established the existence of a digital divide between the privileged and less privileged learners; however, little has been documented on how to effectively move beyond this recognition. The current study aimed to reconceptualise quality early childhood in the digital age through policy, research and practice lenses. The study adopted a qualitative research approach with multi-sited case study as a design. Data was generated using semi-structured interviews whilst Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic content analysis guided the analysis of the data.

The study findings revealed that historic and current policies and practices are responsible for inequalities in digital provisions at ECD level. Lack of agency to design and implement digital interventions that completely obliterate the digital divide by various actors accounts for poor early learning settings we currently experience. The findings position digital equity as a systemic construct and not just a technological fix. The study also unpacks models that can be adopted to fight the digital divide and promote quality early learning experiences. The proposed Mapuranga Framework for action informs global discourse on digital inclusion and provides an avenue for rights based early learning experiences.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Thandile Ntshwanti (Research and Social Impact Management Consultant) - Ntshwanti Consulting

Strengthening Financial Sustainability in Rural ECD Settings through Capacity Building and Mentorship: A Case Study from the Eastern Cape

In many under-resourced and remote communities, early childhood development (ECD) centres struggle with chronic underfunding and delayed government subsidies. This presentation shares learnings from a capacity-building initiative aimed at strengthening the financial sustainability of 19 ECD centres in the rural towns of Molteno and Sterkstroom in South Africa's Eastern Cape.

The initiative formed part of a renewable energy company's socio-economic development (SED) investment and focused on empowering ECD practitioners with practical fundraising and resource mobilisation skills. Through targeted training, personalised mentoring, and hands-on support, practitioners learned to craft funding proposals, engage community donors, and develop local fundraising strategies tailored to their context.

A mixed-methods evaluation – using pre- and post-assessments, activity tracking, and practitioner reflections – revealed encouraging outcomes. Seventeen out of 19 centres developed fundraising plans, 13 submitted written proposals, and 11 secured in-kind or financial support from local partners. Practitioners also reported increased confidence, practical fundraising know-how, and stronger community networks.

This case study demonstrates that ECD practitioners, when equipped with context-relevant tools and mentoring, can play an active role in ensuring their centres' financial sustainability. The presentation concludes with practical recommendations for scaling similar interventions in other rural areas and integrating sustainability and fundraising training into broader ECD support frameworks.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Lisa Wingham (Head of Education and Training) - ORT SA CAPE

Beyond Outcomes: Cultivating Creative and Critical Thinkers

The early years are a critical window for shaping the thinking, social-emotional strength, and adaptability that children will carry into every phase of learning and life. Foundational competencies like problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, resilience, and collaboration – known as “pre-digital” or 21st-century skills – are not soft skills; they are survival skills. Research shows that children who develop these competencies early are more likely to succeed academically, socially, and economically in the long term (OECD, 2015; CASEL, 2020).

At ORT SA CAPE, we believe that developing these skills is not a curriculum add-on – it is the curriculum. Our training encourages teachers to look beyond the checklist of outcomes and recognise their vital role in shaping future-ready children. We support educators to move from a task-based approach to one rooted in purpose, reflection, and intentional skill-building.

One of the ways we do this is through our coding workshops, featuring Dory the Dragon. This unplugged, screen-free programme introduces educators to early computational thinking through playful, narrative-based problem-solving. Teachers experience how coding concepts such as sequencing, logic, and algorithms can simultaneously build language, executive function, and resilience. More than that, they begin to see how foundational thinking skills are woven into everything they do – and how these skills equip children not only for school, but for life.

This presentation offers a call to action that we cannot afford to delay developing these essential capabilities. By equipping teachers with tools, mindsets, and practical strategies, we lay the foundation for children who can adapt, persevere, and thrive in an uncertain future.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Hawa Tayob (Programme Director) - Montessori Early Learning Foundation (MELF)

Space design and learning: Creating an inclusive environment for the young child (aged one and a half to six years)

In this presentation, I will explore different designs and elements in the environment that can meet the developmental needs of children aged 1-6 years.

The child must be free to move in and around the space, so the environment must be adapted to the child's needs because, in turn, the child will adapt to the environment. 'The Prepared Environment' is a key concept in early childhood pedagogy and our foundation. At its simplest, our concern is with the environment, the child within the environment, the relationship of the child with the adults, and activities in the environment.

To feel secure, the young child must inhabit a knowable space – an environment that is comprehensible, navigable, and open to exploration at their own pace. Freedom of movement is essential; therefore, the environment must be thoughtfully prepared and adapted to meet the child's developmental needs. In turn, the child gradually adapts to and internalises the environment. This dynamic lies at the heart of early childhood pedagogy and is embodied in the foundational Montessori concept of The Prepared Environment.

At its core, our focus is threefold: the environment, the child within it, and the evolving relationships between the child, the adults, and the activities in that space.

Creating a knowable space means designing environments with clear articulation and spatial coherence – spaces that support secure orientation and a sense of belonging for all children. The aim is to introduce just enough complexity to stimulate curiosity while ensuring opportunities for meaningful gross motor activity.

Tholisa Matheza (Education Specialist) - Schools Development Unit

From Monolingual Policy to Multilingual Practice: Rethinking Language Use in Early Mathematics Education

This presentation explores the relationship between language, policy, and practice in Grade R mathematics teaching within isiXhosa-dominant classrooms in the Western Cape. Drawing on the theoretical lens of language as a social practice and examining language ideologies embedded in the Language in Education Policy (LiEP), the study investigates how teachers and learners use language to support early mathematical learning.

Through classroom observations and focus group interviews, the research reveals how Grade R teachers navigate their own and their learners' rich linguistic repertoires – predominantly isiXhosa and English – to make mathematics concepts accessible and meaningful. Teachers are found to blend languages fluidly, drawing learners' attention to language forms and meanings, while using multimodal strategies such as storytelling, songs, rhymes, gestures, and concrete objects to scaffold understanding.

Findings reveal a critical tension between the monolingual expectations of the LiEP, which mandates mother tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase, and the heteroglossic realities of multilingual classrooms. Rather than adhering to a single-language approach, teachers and learners draw on diverse linguistic and semiotic resources to negotiate meaning and foster mathematical thinking.

This research highlights the importance of recognising and legitimising these hybrid classroom language practices in policy and curriculum design. It argues for a more flexible, inclusive interpretation of the LiEP that aligns with the lived linguistic realities of South African classrooms. The findings have significant implications for early childhood development (ECD) policy, teacher education, and curriculum development. They underscore the need to support teachers in developing pedagogical strategies that are responsive to the multilingual and multicultural contexts in which they teach.

By bridging research, policy, and practice, this study contributes to a growing body of work advocating for equity and quality in early mathematics education through linguistically and culturally responsive teaching.

ABSTRACTS Day 2

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Julie Hay (Founder & Executive Director) - Singakwenza Early Childhood Education & Suzanne Clulow - Families4Children

Empowering Parents, Enriching Childhoods: Strengthening Partnerships in Early Learning through the Families4Children Project

Parental engagement is a cornerstone of effective early childhood development (ECD). The National Integrated ECD Policy explicitly recognises the important role of parents and primary caregivers. It assigns responsibility for early learning to caregivers, acknowledging that children's educational outcomes are tightly linked to parental engagement and the quality of the home environment. Yet many families remain under-supported in understanding their vital role.

In 2021, three partner organisations undertook a feasibility study to assess the value of scaling up two home-based, parent-led ECD programmes. Ibhayi Lengane focuses on responsive care in the first 1000 days. Play Mat offers opportunities to extend responsive care beyond this period and introduces early learning and stimulation. Based on the positive outcomes of the feasibility study, a pilot project – Families4Children – was rolled out in the Pietermaritzburg area and is currently being trialled in two other provinces.

The pilot project aims to develop and test innovative strategies to empower parents as active participants in their children's early learning through implementation research and the development of a costed model for potential scale-up. By highlighting the long-term value of quality ECD and equipping parents to collaborate meaningfully with practitioners, the project has fostered stronger partnerships between homes and ECD centres.

Delegates in the breakaway session will gain insights into building trust, sparking advocacy, and encouraging ongoing dialogue between families and educators – leading to richer developmental outcomes for children and more connected, confident communities.

Panel Discussion: Let's Talk ECD Budget: Exploring Public and Private Investment in Early Childhood Development in South Africa



Panellists



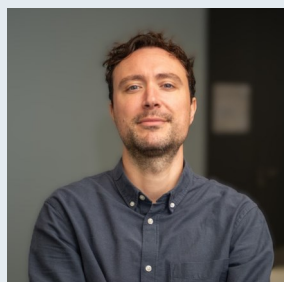
Malusi Ntoyapi is a Programmes and Innovation Manager at the HCI Foundation, where he supports a wide range of South African not-for-profit organisations in contributing to the building of a thriving, sustainable country. His work is grounded in Ubuntu. He believes that a strong, supported, and organised ECD community with a shared vision and quality programming principles can ensure that no one is left behind. Before joining the Foundation, he worked for the Project for the Study of Alternative Education (PRAESA) in South Africa, where he worked on the national reading-for-enjoyment campaign, Nal'ibali. Since 2011, he has volunteered with the Vulindlela Reading Club in Philippi, sharing his time and skills to nurture young multilingual readers and thinkers while strengthening community learning.



Daniel Peter Al-Naddaf is a legal researcher and attorney at the Equal Education Law Centre (EELC), specialising in ECD, child safeguarding, and budget advocacy. He represents the EELC on the Real Reform 4 ECD Steering Committee and is an active member of the Budget Justice Coalition, focusing on education and ECD financing. Daniel is also a Research Associate in the University of Johannesburg's Department of Childhood Education.



Giuliana Bland has dedicated more than 25 years to strengthening South Africa's ECD sector. Since 2005, she has served as Director of the Jim Joel Fund, where she has guided its grant making and support to organisations working to expand access to quality early learning for the country's most marginalised young children. Her focus has been especially on organisations serving rural communities, where services are scarce and children are most at risk of being left behind. Under her leadership, the Jim Joel Fund has become a trusted and consistent partner in the sector, building organisational resilience, fostering innovation, nurturing a pipeline of emerging leaders, and supporting collaboration across the field.



Daniel McLaren joined Ilifa Labantwana as a Public Finance Economist in 2023, where his focus is on finding the right financing solutions to expand access to quality early childhood development services. This includes research on appropriate funding models, economic modelling, developing an investment case for ECD, undertaking public advocacy, as well as providing technical support to government to enable more informed planning and systems change implementation.

Facilitator

Yusrah Ehrenreich obtained a Bachelor of Social Sciences degree majoring in Political Studies and Economics from the University of Cape Town in 2012 and completed a Post-graduate LLB degree in 2015 at the same university. Yusrah completed her articles and practised as an attorney at Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr, where she gained experience in corporate and commercial law specialising in mergers and acquisitions with JSE-listed companies, competition law, constitutional and administrative law, and public law litigation. She joined the Centre for Early Childhood Development in 2020 to head up its legal, advocacy and social justice work. She is a consultant for Van Wyk and Associates and also sits on the board of The Helix Collective NPC, founded to address the need for urgent practical financial support for early learning and nutrition to children in South Africa.

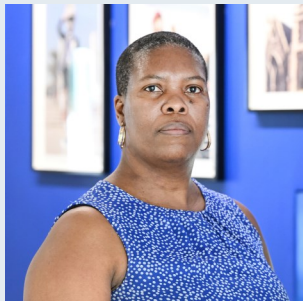




Panel Discussion: Laying the Foundation: 30 Years of Building Early Literacy and Language in South Africa



Panellists



Dr Xolisa Guzula is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Language and Literacy Studies at the University of Cape Town, with a focus on multilingual and multiliteracies education, especially in teaching children to speak, read and write in two or more languages. She is one of the founders of a network of reading clubs growing across the country including Vulindlela Reading Clubs and Nal'ibali Reading Clubs. She has written several children's books, including the recent series *Imbokodo: Women who shape us*, and has translated many children's books from English to isiXhosa. She has won a number of IBBY/Exclusive Books awards for best translation, including of Nonikiwe Mashologu's book *Sing Nala* to *Cula Nala* in isiXhosa. Xolisa is a member of Bua-lit Language and Literacy Collective, working on social justice in language and literacy education. She is also the Chair of the Western Cape Committee of the Literacy Association of South Africa (LITASA).



Prof Carole Bloch's focus is on early literacy in African multilingual settings and reading culture development from birth onwards; she promotes a holistic pedagogy that focuses on the power of story and personal meaning making to help ensure equitable learning opportunities for all children and the adults they interact with. In 2012, as director of PRAESA, Carole co-initiated the Nal'ibali National Reading for Enjoyment Campaign, which she led for four years. She has authored several books and facilitated writing and translation for children from birth onwards in African languages and English. Carole is an Extraordinary Professor in Language Education, University of the Western Cape. She served for four years on the committee for the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), and as its Vice-President 2018-20.



Nonikiwe Mashologu is a passionate literacy advocate, children's book author, and co-founder of Bini Birdies, a social enterprise supporting whole-child development through literacy, play, and child-centred design. With nearly two decades of experience in the literacy sector, she has worked with leading organisations including Nal'ibali, Room to Read, and the Otto Foundation, where she led partnerships and library initiatives. She also contributed to the award-winning First Words in Print project at the National Library of South Africa's Centre for the Book, which distributed multilingual books to young children across the country. Her training and facilitation work supports ECD practitioners, learners, and beyond in building joyful, story-rich learning environments. Recognised as one of 12 women driving literacy change in South Africa, Nonikiwe continues to champion reading as a radical, joyful, and essential act, one book, one story, and one young reader at a time.



Dr Shelley O'Carroll started her career as a Remedial Teacher and Educational Psychologist with a special interest in reading difficulties. She completed her doctorate at the University of London, focusing on an early literacy intervention for Grade One children learning to read in English as a second language. She was the founding director of Wordworks, a leading early literacy non-governmental organisation, and led the organisation for 16 years. She has developed early language and literacy materials and programmes from birth to seven years, and been involved in research exploring the impact of early interventions. She is working as a consultant with a special interest in bridging research and practice in early language and literacy development.

Facilitator

Jessica Blom is Deputy Director at the Centre for Early Childhood Development, where she also leads large-scale ECD programmes. She holds a master's degree in Social Development from the University of Cape Town and has spent the past decade driving change for young children across South Africa. Jessica has served as Western Cape Chairperson of the Literacy Association of South Africa and on its national board, and has lectured at UCT on social development and research. In 2019, she was recognised as one of South Africa's Top 100 Young South Africans.



Mlungisi Nyamane (Science Specialist) - Osizweni Science Centre

Evaluating the Cognitive, Social, and Motor Skill Development of Pre-school Children through Duplo Block Play in Day-care Centres

The Osizweni Science Centre runs an ECD centre for day-care centres in the Govan Mbeki Municipality. Many day-care centres lack the resources for fulfilling their mandate of delivering good quality education. Many children experience mental, physical and social challenges as they progress through the education system. This study evaluates the impact of Duplo block play on the cognitive, social, and motor skill development of pre-school children.

The research explores how structured and unstructured play with Duplo blocks influences problem-solving abilities, collaboration, communication, and fine motor coordination. The study employs pre- and post-test assessments, structured observations, teacher and parent questionnaires, and focus group discussions to gather quantitative and qualitative data, utilising a mixed-methods approach. A sample of 50 children aged three to six years, across five day-care centres, participated in an 8-week intervention period during which Duplo blocks were integrated into daily play activities.

The findings were expected to reveal measurable improvements in targeted developmental domains, highlighting the educational value of construction play. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for incorporating play-based learning tools like Duplo into early childhood curricula to enhance holistic development. The results aim to inform educators, caregivers, and policymakers on effective, low-cost strategies to support early learning outcomes.

Informed consent was sought from the day-care centres for children to participate in the study. They were informed about the contents of the study and their right to withdraw from it at any time. The participants' confidentiality was observed throughout the study. The identifiers were removed, too. Their participation was voluntary. They were briefed about the findings of the study after its completion. They were informed that their contributions will help the relevant stakeholders to improve their curricular approaches.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Justine Jowell (Programme Value Chain Design) - SmartStart Early Learning NPC

Scaling quality early learning: New evidence on home and community-based programmes as a pragmatic strategy for access to quality early learning and development

Background

SmartStart was set up in 2015 to achieve population-level change in access to quality childcare and early learning, by harnessing the potential of home and community-based early learning programmes (ELPs). There are currently over 150,000 children enrolled in approximately 14,000 SmartStart programmes across every type of community in South Africa.

Research questions

An earlier outcome evaluation of SmartStart programmes highlighted strong gains in child development. However, after rapid growth, a new evaluation was necessary to assess whether these gains could be sustained. The research sought to answer the question – Does a pragmatic home and community-based solution for access to quality childcare and early learning work at scale?

Methodology

Researchers tracked 551 children from 325 SmartStart programmes over eight months, using South Africa's nationally benchmarked Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM). Analysis employed regression methods to compare changes relative to ELOM benchmarks, after adjusting for observable differences.

Key findings

The proportion of children 'Achieving the standard' rose from 45% to 65%, while those 'At risk' nearly halved. The SmartStart cohort outperformed the nationally representative Thrive by Five Index across all domains, with the equity gap between the lowest and highest income quintiles narrowing from 25 to 6 points.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study demonstrates that a home and community-based early learning delivery platform in low-income communities, can significantly improve early childhood outcomes, even at scale.

This has substantial implications for the design of effective strategies to close the early childhood care and education (ECCE) access gaps, and for developing more contextually relevant theories of quality.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Glenda Shupinyaneng (Executive Director) - South African Education Project (SAEP)

Healing Spaces, Learning Places: Trauma-Informed Interventions for ECD in Philippi

In communities marked by chronic poverty, high violence, and intergenerational trauma, early childhood development (ECD) must go beyond curriculum delivery; it must begin with healing. This presentation shares the journey of the South African Education Project's (SAEP) Safe and Thriving Family Strengthening Programme, a trauma-informed model rooted in the realities of Philippi, Cape Town, one of the most under-resourced and high-risk areas in South Africa.

With a footprint in 149 ECD centres and reaching over 7,000 children annually, SAEP combines psychosocial support, caregiver empowerment, and educator capacity building to create safer, more nurturing environments where young children can learn, grow, and thrive. The programme integrates child-at-risk case management, parent workshops, play therapy, and practitioner training to address both the emotional and developmental needs of children. Critically, it centres the home as a site of intervention recognising that children cannot learn when their basic need for safety and belonging remains unmet.

Drawing from real case studies and practitioner testimonies, this presentation explores how embedding social work and trauma-responsive practices within ECD systems can unlock lasting impact. It also highlights the challenges of scaling care-driven models in resource-limited settings and offers a replicable approach for similar contexts.

At SAEP, we believe that healing and learning must coexist. To shape the future of ECD in South Africa, we must first create the conditions for children not just to survive but to thrive.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Bulelwa Mggobele (ECD Coordinator), Ntombozuko Peter & Thandiswa Gatywa

Ubunye Foundation

Instilling community leadership of ECD centres through community-led monitoring

The Ubunye Foundation is a community-led organisation, where village members design, manage, monitor and evaluate programmes. The Isisekelo programme partners with 57 early childhood development (ECD) centres in rural Eastern Cape villages. These ECD centres aim to be wholly community-owned, sustainable and financially independent Early Learning resources accessible to all under 5s in their local areas. The parent body members and the ECD practitioners work together towards achieving seven self-selected goals.

To instil greater community ownership of early childhood education in rural communities, we have designed a tool, the Ubunye app, that assists ECD practitioners, parent body members, parents, and carers in designing, managing, and monitoring their centres themselves. Using this app, ECD centres collate information about their activities over time, enabling them to chart their progress towards reaching their seven goals. They can also use the app to share with others, request assistance and access local resources. For the Isisekelo staff team, the app provides an overall view of gaps, what individual ECD centres need and where resources and skills building should be targeted.

The ECD centres enter the information online. It is then fed back to them via a series of dashboards that are available only to them, but they can also make these available for public viewing. For those who don't have smartphones, the app is available for them to use on tablets at ECD centres, schools, clinics and with Ubunye staff and volunteers. Ultimately, the app will be dual language (isiXhosa and English) and available on voice command and audio play.

In this paper, ECD centre practitioners will demonstrate some of the data they have collected using the app and how they use it to manage their centres.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Cathy Mather-Pike (Director) - Siyakwazi NPO

Inclusive ECD Hubs: Embedding Disability Inclusion into Rural ECD through Practitioner Upskilling

It is estimated that one in ten children may experience a developmental disability during early childhood, yet children with disabilities remain among the most underserved by South Africa's ECD sector. Without early identification and support, these children are more likely to face persistent educational delays and widening developmental gaps. Recognising the pivotal role ECD practitioners play in disrupting this trajectory, Siyakwazi has developed and piloted a scalable, community-led model to embed disability inclusion into rural ECD systems.

This presentation introduces Siyakwazi's Inclusive ECD Hub model, which trains and mentors rural practitioners as "inclusion advocates" – educators equipped to recognise developmental delays, adapt learning environments, and support individualised pathways to inclusion. In 2023, a 12-month pilot was implemented with three centres outside Siyakwazi's traditional service area, providing practitioners with contextually relevant training, practical tools, and remote mentorship. Findings indicate that equipping local practitioners with knowledge, tools, and confidence in inclusive practice fosters early identification of disability, improves classroom participation, and strengthens continuity of learning.

Building on these learnings, Siyakwazi is expanding the model in 2025 through intensive facilitation training for its core team and in partnership with Impande to reach over 350 ECD centres across Ugu District in the coming years. Grounded in reflective learning and ongoing support, the model aligns with Siyakwazi's broader vision: that every child, regardless of individual needs, has the right to access quality early learning.

This session will share insights from the pilot phase, reflect on inclusive pedagogy in resource-constrained settings, and demonstrate how centring disability inclusion in ECD practitioner development can offer both a scalable response to early learning exclusion and a practical route toward inclusive education goals in South Africa.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Debbie Prudhomme (Principal of Chaeli Cottage) & Rosemary Luger - The Chaeli Campaign/
Chaeli Cottage

Inclusion Matters - A Study of Chaeli Cottage, a Fully Inclusive ECD Centre, Where Disabled and Non-disabled Children Play and Learn Together

Inclusion matters at the early childhood development (ECD) level.

Chaeli Cottage in Plumstead is an example of inclusion at work.

Inclusion of all children in ECD centres should be a certainty. Sadly this is not the case.

By describing our journey in setting up and growing an inclusive pre-school, I will show how inclusion works in an ECD setting. I will explain how the daily programme can and does work for ALL children, with all their educational needs being met on different levels. By tracing the journeys of some of our children, I will be able to showcase the learning and growing that takes place in a truly inclusive setting where children who are developing neuro-typically learn and play together with children with disabilities. I will also touch on the logistical problems which need to be overcome and the collaborative work needed to be done by a hands-on staff.

At this small school, any visitor will notice children with all different abilities, races or religious groups playing together and learning while they play. At this young age, where children are absorbing everything that they see and hear, they experience “living” inclusion every day.

After 12 years, Chaeli Cottage has educated many children and sent them out into the world to live as better citizens and to promote inclusion.

Seyuri Naidoo (Lecturer) - STADIO Higher Education

Pre-service teachers' experiences of using play-based pedagogy to incorporate Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Early Childhood Education classrooms

This qualitative study explores pre-service teachers' experiences in employing play-based pedagogy to integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) within Early Childhood Education (ECE) classrooms. The integration of IKS into higher education is of paramount importance. IKS encompasses the rich cultural heritage, philosophies, and practices developed by indigenous communities over generations. Incorporating IKS into higher education curricula not only validates and preserves these knowledge systems, but also promotes a more inclusive and diverse academic environment. Guided by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the research examines how pre-service teachers mediate between traditional knowledge systems and contemporary pedagogical practices. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with pre-service teachers enrolled in a Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase programme in South Africa. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes related to the role of play in facilitating culturally responsive teaching, challenges in aligning IKS with standardised curricula, and the development of professional identity through the integration of indigenous practices. Findings suggest that ECE pre-service teachers possess a superficial awareness of IKS. Although some pre-service teachers reported IKS integration through play-based strategies such as *diketo* or cultural show-and-tell, these emerged sporadically and were guided more by personal intuition rather than structured pedagogical frameworks. The study recommends that teacher training programs should integrate IKS through structured modules on socio-cultural learning; provide pre-service teachers with IKS aligned resources. Lastly, they should build partnerships with Indigenous Knowledge bearers to allow pre-service teachers to co-create curricula based on lived experiences.

Authors: Seyuri Naidoo and Moses Letsapa

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Ipeleng Mohlala (CEO) - The Early Care Foundation

Strengthening Early Childhood Development through Community-Based Interventions: The Rustenburg Project

The Rustenburg Project is a collaborative initiative between the Early Care Foundation and The Do More Foundation, designed to enhance early childhood development (ECD) outcomes in underserved communities in Rustenburg, North West province, South Africa, through collective impact. The project adopts a holistic, community-based approach to nurturing care that integrates both policy and practice to improve the quality of care and education for children aged 0–5.

Drawing on the National ECD Policy 2015, the project seeks to bring to life a 'basket of services' adapted from the policy mandated comprehensive package designed to support optimal development in the early years. This basket includes nutrition support, early learning stimulation, capacity building and leadership, parental engagement, infrastructure development, child protection and access to health and social services. These services are tailored to the specific needs of local communities and implemented through strong partnerships with local stakeholders

A key innovation of the project is the establishment of the Young Child Forum, a platform where principals, practitioners, parents, day mothers, and other stakeholders convene to discuss critical ECD issues such as compliance, nutrition, and caregiver support. The ECD Technical Committee within the forum plays a vital role in driving stakeholder engagement and shaping the local ECD agenda through dialogue and collaborative problem-solving.

The project has capacitated 51 ECD centres, 102 practitioners, reached more than 1,400 children, and improved developmental outcomes using tools such as the Learning Programme Quality Assessment. It also aims to increase parental involvement and support ECD centres in meeting national compliance standards. This presentation will share lessons and insights from the ground, marking the three-year milestone of the Rustenburg Project. The project offers a scalable model for sustainable ECD transformation and contributes meaningfully to national efforts to ensure that every child can thrive in a nurturing, supportive environment.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Diana Duran (Senior Programme Manager) - The Education Outcomes Fund

Partnerships for Public Purpose: Using Outcomes-Based Finance to Drive Quality Access in South African ECD

In South Africa today, 1.3 million children under the age of five do not have access to any form of Early Learning Programme (ELP), and only 3 in 10 children in the poorest quintile are developmentally on track. Recognising the urgency, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has launched an ambitious 2030 Early Childhood Development (ECD) strategy to expand quality early learning, prioritising vulnerable children through a publicly planned, mixed-provision model.

To accelerate this vision, the Government of South Africa and the Education Outcomes Fund (EOF), together with a coalition of partners, have co-designed a pioneering USD 28.6 million Outcomes Fund. This initiative seeks to improve early learning and development outcomes for over 100,000 underserved children in Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal. At the heart of this approach is Outcomes-Based Financing (OBF) – a results-driven funding model that ties payments to measurable improvements in children's development.

OBF marks a shift from paying for activities to paying for impact. It promotes accountability, unlocks innovation, and ensures that every investment delivers real, lasting value. This Outcomes Fund also features a robust learning agenda, generating high-quality data on cost-effectiveness, implementation quality, and contextual factors that drive results. These insights will directly shape future ECD policy and investment strategies.

Importantly, the fund fosters a culture of continuous learning and adaptation. Collaborative spaces will allow implementers to share experiences, respond in real time, and refine interventions to enhance effectiveness. This dynamic feedback loop is essential to scaling what works – faster and smarter.

Phase I of the Outcomes Fund lays the foundation for long-term transformation. Lessons learned are already informing the design of Phase II, which aims to reduce complexity, broaden access, and scale impact nationally. Together, through OBF, we can deliver on the promise of universal quality access in South Africa.

This presentation is co-authored by Diana Duran (Senior Programme Manager) and Walt Hetzel, of The Education Outcomes Fund.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Tyler Howard (Programme Director) & Dr Mary James - Thanda

Storybooks as ECD Curriculum Themes: What If We Asked Different Questions?

What if we stopped asking preschoolers what the weather is today – and started asking how it feels to be the “odd dog out”, or what it means to be a “wild thing”? What if we believed children are capable of more conceptual and emotional insight than we assume?

We believe traditional early childhood development (ECD) programmes over-emphasise surface-level knowledge, while underestimating children’s capacity for abstract thought and emotional reasoning. Rather than treating storybooks as supplementary, we place them at the heart of our ECD curriculum. Each theme is a storybook that speaks to “game-changing skills” like empathy or critical thinking. For two weeks at a time, the storybook guides discussion, play, reflection, and activities, while also addressing more traditional topics like seasons, family, or transport.

In Thanda’s Grade 000 and 00 curriculum, books such as *Odd Dog Out* (self-esteem), *Where the Wild Things Are* (belonging), and *They All Saw a Cat* (perspective) prompt rich dialogue about identity, moral choices, and Ubuntu. Through these deep dives, children develop expressive vocabulary, advanced inferencing, and deeper emotional literacy. Observations and classroom data reflect cognitive and social development that often exceeds age expectations. 2024 ELOM assessments show that 95% of children leaving Thanda’s ECD programme were on track for Grade R – far outperforming both provincial and national averages.

This approach is informed by evidence-based pedagogy and sociocultural learning theory, recognising narrative as a powerful scaffold for understanding self and others. By reimagining ECD curriculum, we reposition children not as passive recipients, but as active meaning-makers capable of nuanced emotional and cognitive insight. This model offers a replicable framework that supports both academic readiness and socio-emotional development – all without prescribing how or what young children should think.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Nazley Giquel (Programme Associate) & Bokamoso Action Mohokare - The Unlimited Child

Closing the Quality Gap: A Scalable Model for Data-Driven ECD Improvement and Advocacy

The Unlimited Child is a South African non-profit organisation delivering a scalable early childhood development (ECD) model designed to improve quality at scale across under-resourced ECD centres. With over 6,400 partner sites nationally and expanding interest internationally, The Unlimited Child is redefining what it means to deliver equitable, evidence-based, and high-impact ECD.

This presentation showcases how The Unlimited Child is using real-time monitoring, AI-driven insights, and practitioner-led self-assessment tools to build a continuous quality improvement feedback loop. By leveraging low technology messaging services that are easily accessible, the organisation delivers personalised developmental support to practitioners – transforming data into actionable coaching and elevating quality without overburdening the system. The model aligns with national goals for ECD quality improvement, supports registration-readiness, and builds practitioner capacity from within communities. Crucially, this data-rich ecosystem fuels advocacy efforts, allowing The Unlimited Child to influence policy shifts, funding models, and ECD workforce development strategies.

The presentation will explore lessons learned, scalable mechanisms for quality assurance, and how smart monitoring and evaluation can move beyond compliance to become a driver of systemic change. It will also propose how ECD organisations can reposition themselves as strategic actors in shaping the future of the sector.

Matshidiso Sello (Senior Researcher) - Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg

The Cost of Care: Payment Delays and Socioeconomic Pressures Facing ECD Practitioners in South Africa

Early childhood development (ECD) practitioners are a cornerstone of care and overall wellbeing of children in ECD centres. Despite their importance, ECD practitioners' psychosocial wellbeing is often overlooked in policy and research. While prior studies have documented challenges such as low pay and limited career progression, less attention has been given to the problem of delayed salary payments. This is an often-overlooked form of economic insecurity that disproportionately affects women and household breadwinners. This study aimed to explore the interplay between salary payment and the ECD practitioners' work conditions, economic insecurity, and professional recognition. The cross-sectional, nationally representative Thrive by Five Index data collected in 2021 among 2 288 ECD practitioners was analysed. Data was analysed at the univariate, bivariate and multivariable levels. Using logistic regression, the outcome of the study was timely salary payment. The findings show that being a breadwinner significantly increased the likelihood of economic-psychosocial stress (OR = 1.33, $p = 0.009$). Practitioners residing in large households (9+ members) were also significantly more likely to report stress (OR = 2.74, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, the presence of workplace support (OR = 0.65, $p < 0.001$) and access to special referrals and mentoring significantly reduced the odds of untimely salary payment.

This study highlights that delayed salary payments among ECD practitioners is deeply linked to poor working conditions, income insecurity, and lack of professional recognition. A coordinated, intersectoral community of practice involving government departments, ECD centres, and parents is essential. Such collaboration should focus on ensuring equitable access to ECD services and promoting supportive working environments. Importantly, the sector must move toward formalising employment conditions, securing stable contracts, fair wages, and consistent payments for practitioners. Addressing payment delays is not only a labour rights issue but also essential for delivering quality early learning and achieving equity in early childhood development.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Bulelani Futshane (Programs Manager) - Starting Chance

Mobilising Parents as Partners in Early Learning: A Practical Approach through the Starting Chance Parent Support Programme

At Starting Chance, we believe that a child's first and most important teacher is their parent. In response to the need for greater parental involvement in early childhood education, we have developed and implemented a Parent Support Programme aimed at empowering families of children aged 0–6 years to take an active role in their children's literacy and holistic development.

The programme comprises quarterly parent workshops and bi-annual resource training sessions designed to equip parents with knowledge, confidence, and practical tools to support learning at home. A key feature of our approach is the use of low-cost, recycled materials to create engaging, story-rich learning resources. By modelling how to craft toys, books, and story props from everyday household items, we make literacy development accessible, affordable, and culturally relevant.

Our presentation will showcase how the Parent Support Programme fosters a community of practice among parents, encourages creative storytelling, and reinforces the importance of play-based learning. We will demonstrate how we bring stories to life using recycled materials and provide examples of how this approach has improved parent-child interaction and early literacy practices at home.

By sharing our insights and lessons learned, we aim to highlight the transformative role parents can play in early learning when given the right support and tools – especially in under-resourced communities. Our model offers a replicable framework for organisations seeking to mobilise parents as active partners in literacy development.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Seipati Baloyi-Mothibeli (Lecturer) - University of the Free State

Creating neurodiversity-affirming spaces: the role of social interactive environment and practitioner beliefs in early years

Background

Neurodivergent children often encounter barriers in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings due to standardised developmental expectations, rigid environments, and practitioner attitudes. This research explores how practitioners can transform play spaces to affirm neurodiversity by examining the influence of the physical environment, peer interaction, and practitioner beliefs. Many ECCE settings still marginalise neurodivergent children by placing a higher priority on neurotypical norms, even in the face of policy changes toward inclusive education. There is a lack of research on how everyday practices, spatial arrangements, and teacher perspectives affirm or exclude neurodiverse identities. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the social model of disability, the study sees neurodiversity as a normal variation in human development rather than a deficiency. These frameworks highlight the significance of inclusive social and physical contexts in shaping children's learning experiences and identity formation. I used the phenomenology design in the five selected inclusive ECCE settings through environmental evaluation and semi-structured interviews with 10 practitioners. After semi-structured interviews and environmental assessment data were transcribed, thematic analysis was used to identify emerging themes.

Results

Due to a lack of resources and insufficient training on engaging neurodivergent children in a socially integrated play pedagogy environment, I found that the evaluated environment and the attitudes of practitioners were not supporting and giving the neurodivergent children in the ECCE opportunities to learn and thrive, according to the qualitative data. Additionally, I discovered that parents of neurodivergent children had to deal with the difficulty of providing secure learning environments and assistance.

Recommendations

It was recommended that the starting point should be a collaboration with health services specialists and that there should also be advocacy on neurodiversity to guide parents of neurodivergent children and the community so that they understand different disorders.

ABSTRACTS Day 3

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Carrie Mashek (Programme Manager) & Simoné Janse Van Vuuren (ECD Programme Lead) - YearBeyond

Growing Futures: ECD and Youth Employment, Reimagined

South Africa is in the grip of a literacy crisis. Despite years of interventions in schools, national assessments show persistent decline. Research is clear: children who thrive in literacy have early access to books, caregivers who read, and rich exposure to storytelling – long before they enter formal schooling.

As the government increases investment in early childhood development (ECD), an urgent question arises: Can we meet two pressing national priorities at once – ensuring strong early literacy foundations and tackling youth unemployment?

YearBeyond, a national youth service programme, offers a compelling model. It recruits unemployed young people (aged 18-25 years), known as YeBoneers, into meaningful, community-based service while supporting their transition into further education, work, or entrepreneurship. Operating in under-resourced communities, the programme delivers dual impact: transforming the lives of youth and improving outcomes for children and families.

In 2023, YearBeyond launched Little Explorers, an ECD-focused programme aimed at children aged 3-5 years. The initiative addresses gaps in access to quality early learning by placing trained YeBoneers in ECD centres and homes, where they deliver weekly, play-based literacy and development sessions. These sessions integrate storytelling, physical play, and language-building activities – supported by monthly distribution of picture books to families.

By bringing learning into informal and formal ECD spaces and homes – Little Explorers nurtures a love of stories, imagination, and school readiness in young children. At the same time, it provides youth with valuable work experience and skill-building in professionalism, communication, and emotional intelligence. Seventy-five percent of YeBoneer alumni transition into further study or employment, with a growing number pursuing careers in teaching.

This session explores how investing in youth as early learning champions can unlock a powerful double dividend – improving outcomes for young children while preparing a new generation for meaningful work and citizenship.

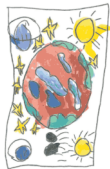
EXHIBITORS

Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future



higher education
& training
Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

COLLEGE OF
CAPE TOWN
Inspiring minds



Africa
Reggio
Emilia
ALLIANCE



findingthabor

GROW ECD



JET EDUCATION SERVICES
THINK EDUCATION. THINK JET.



ORT SA CAPE
EDUCATION



PROTECTIVE
BEHAVIOURS
SOUTHERN AFRICA



SHONAQUIP
SOCIAL ENTERPRISE
Enabling inclusion



Vivlia
Education for the Nation
Publishers & Booksellers (Pty) Ltd
An independent, black-owned
South African company



Quality Early Childhood Development in South Africa: Celebrating three decades of ECD in South Africa

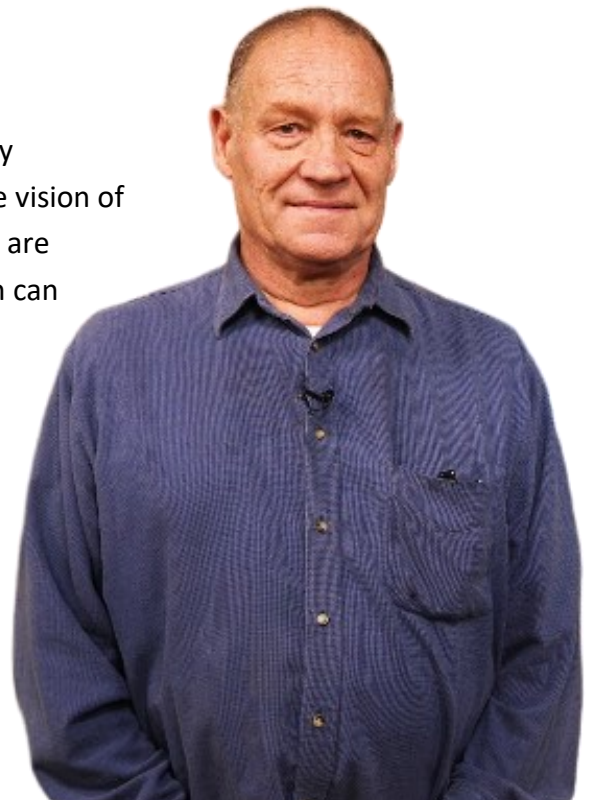
Lessons from the Past | Opportunities for the Present | Shaping the Future

Vote of Thanks and Closing Remarks

Prof Eric Atmore

Professor Eric Atmore is the Director of the Centre for Early Childhood Development, a non-profit organisation with the vision of a society that puts young children first, meaning that there are quality ECD services across South Africa, so that all children can grow and develop to their full potential.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who has made this conference possible, as together we endeavour to put young children first, while reflecting on the past, assessing the present, and envisioning the future of ECD in South Africa.



higher education
& training
Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

COLLEGE OF
CAPE TOWN
Inspiring minds

Contact the Centre for Early Childhood Development on

conference@cecd.org.za

For more information visit

www.qualityecdconference.co.za



 www.cecd.org.za

 @CentreForEarlyChildhoodDevelopment

 @CECD_online

 +27 21 683 2420

 conference@cecd.org.za



higher education
& training

Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**COLLEGE OF
CAPE TOWN** 
Inspiring minds

College of Cape Town

 www.cct.edu.za

 College of Cape Town - Inspiring Minds

 @CCT_Official