

ECD: Building blocks for lifelong learning

South Africa has the goal of universal access to a full range of early childhood development (ECD) services in 10 years' time. To meet this target, we will need more than 100,000 additional early learning teachers and 40,000 new venues for three- to five-year-olds alone, say education experts.



Image source: Getty Images

South African children are surviving rather than thriving, it was agreed at the recent Dialogue Business in Society Virtual Conference. 'Breaking Barriers to Quality Education' was a key theme, with these sessions presented in partnership with Old Mutual on 13 October.

Panellists Nicole Biondi (Strategic Head of marketing and communications at Innovation Edge), Justine Jowell (Programme Design Lead at SmartStart) and Megan Blair (CEO Earlybird Educare@Work) discussed how to accelerate access to, and drive the enrichment of, ECD.

Moderated by Kanyisa Diamond, senior project manager at the Old Mutual Foundation, the session unpacked different early learning models. Participants considered which ECD interventions are most effective, and what needs to be done differently to achieve the goal of the National Development Plan (NDP): universal access to a full range of ECD services for all children aged 0-8 by 2030.

The South African Early Childhood Review 2019 shows that we have made some progress in terms of ECD. Maternal and child mortality rates are on a downward trend, but we still struggle with nutrition (27% of children under five suffer from stunting), support for primary caregivers, and the stimulation of early learning.

Models for social impact

Justine Jowell of SmartStart said systems intervention is needed to close the provisioning gap. Some 1.2 million children aged three to four years are not attending an early learning programme, 900,000 of them from poor households.

“To achieve universal access to quality early learning for all three- to five-year-olds, we need more than 100,000 additional early learning practitioners and 40,000 new venues. To reach these high numbers of excluded children, system capacity must be expanded. This needs to happen fast to bring children in sooner.”

SmartStart is an example of a national early learning delivery platform that operates under a social franchise model. SmartStart currently includes 13 organisations (independent, locally based NPOs) across nine provinces in the country that form part of the SmartStart delivery platform (as franchisors), enabling SmartStart’s rapid acceleration of reach of new children in a locally relevant and responsive way.

This model helps to create direct employment and support microenterprise development, especially for women. In the five years since set-up, this model has allowed SmartStart to reach more than 75,000 children, with nearly 4,000 active early learning social enterprises (franchisees) supported to run quality early learning programmes.

Employer-sponsored educare

Earlybird, a social enterprise, provides on-site educare services to companies that want to attract and retain top talent, particularly women. “There is a good deal of evidence that employer-sponsored educare improves productivity, reducing single-day leave-taking and enabling greater female labour force participation and progression,” said Blair.

A portion of net income from the for-profit side of the business cross-subsidises the non-profit side, which funds young black women to set up Blue Door Educare Centres as entrepreneurs. These high-quality educare centres serve low-income environments and also partner with social housing developers, with a goal to bring quality learning to all young children.

Low-cost learning material

Innovation Edge, an innovation catalyst and social impact investor, believes in supporting early learning programmes and ensuring that caregivers get support to equip children for lifelong success. In one of their projects, they work with design and manufacturing company Barrows to print and distribute early learning materials to under-resourced communities, using blank production space available on existing client print runs.

The posters and flash cards they create at minimal cost are distributed at their nine business hubs in each province of the country – and they provide more than 50,000 pieces of educational material to children in under-resourced areas each month.

They have also partnered with Out There Media on the 3 Little Minutes mobile SMS campaign, which provides caregivers with data-free access to roughly three minutes of songs and stories located on a mobi-site. The campaign is delivered via the Mobucks™ platform, which links the mobile operator with businesses wanting to advertise to specific audience (thus content is sponsored).

“The pilot was in English, but the next stage will include more languages,” said Biondi. “Content on the system is provided by Book Dash and Nal’ibali, and they do have content in various South African languages, in the form of songs and stories.”

Biondi said that Innovation Edge is working with government on compiling data sets of national early child assessments to understand how literate, numerate and school-ready children may be. “We really want to get South Africa excited about how children enter school, because if we can shift the way they enter schools we can surely shift the way they are leaving school.”

Effective interventions

A snap poll during the session asked delegates which ECD interventions they think are the most effective. The majority (62%) said training teachers works best, followed by providing nutrition (12%) and providing equipment (12%). A further 6% listed helping with registration and 6% said building infrastructure was most effective.

Blair pointed out that preventing exposure to violence is also an important factor, as toxic stress has a huge effect on development. Assuming nutrition and infrastructure are in place, training is the most effective way to improve child outcomes, she said.

“There is broad agreement that in-service training is crucial – just-in-time pedagogical support – that involves meeting a teacher on a weekly or monthly basis and finding out what they are battling with.” She said this type of intervention is exponentially more effective than pre-service training.

Biondi suggested that companies think about subsidising their employees’ children so they can receive quality education, as well as considering parental leave. “Don’t just support external ECD providers. Look inside as well as outside,” she recommended.

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