STARTING THEM YOUNG

Studies report that early education is fundamental to mediating a dysfunctional education system and alleviating poverty in the long run.

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SOUTH Africa’s education crisis is manifesting in the country’s poor performance in literacy and numeracy at primary school level, significantly poor matric pass rates, and the ongoing challenges in higher education.

International research, however, clearly shows that a focus on – and investment in – children’s early years can mediate the dysfunctional education system and alleviate the persistence of poverty and inequality in the long run.

A major part of the problem is that the majority of young children in South Africa are not adequately prepared to enter the formal education system due to severe poverty and inequality. Extensive local and international research shows that when children receive an educational foundation in the form of quality early childhood development (ECD), they are protected against the negative effects of poverty and inequality.

Such ECD programmes have profound effects on the development of young children and can set them on a path to future success in schooling and in later life as adults participating in the labour market.

Specifically, research has shown that children who receive quality ECD programmes will perform better at formal school, will be less likely to need costly remedial education, less likely to get involved in crime and drugs, more likely to be employed, and, for girls, will be less likely to become pregnant during their teenage years.

This in turn leads to a more prosperous society. On the flip side... research has shown that a lack of an educational foundation for children from birth to six years has severe long-term effects on the child; negatively affects their success in schooling and adulthood, and perpetuates poverty, inequality and unemployment.

By focusing on more efficient and effective implementation of ECD policy, a greater number of children benefit from ECD programmes. ECD interventions were found to be one of the most cost-effective intervention strategies to reduce poverty and inequality, providing a significantly high rate of return on investment.

By adopting the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy, the government acknowledged the importance and socio-economic potential of quality ECD programmes and a need to increase children’s access to these services. The challenge lies in implementation to realise these goals.

A new study by the Centre for Early Childhood Development has produced a substantial set of implementation guidelines on effective ECD programme options that meet the needs of South Africa’s young children.

Studies

The study focused on improving access to quality ECD programmes by developing a database of quality, practical, achievable and cost-effective ECD programme options currently being provided, which can be replicated across the country.

The study was supported by a partnership between the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development, a research and capacity-building initiative funded by the EU, based in the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation.

This study focused on 12 case studies that explored a range of centre-based and non-centre-based ECD interventions being implemented in rural and urban areas across the country. These are best practice examples of programmes that have a positive effect on young children. Each case provides a detailed description of implementation aimed to improve systems, ensuring that the right knowledge is available for decision-making and increasing the level of service delivery by the ECD sector.

The study emphasised the importance of non-centre-based provision (such as home-visiting programmes, play groups, and toy libraries) for children who are unable to access centre-based interventions. Currently, 63% of young children are not accessing centre-based ECD for reasons of affordability, reach, or availability. With the bulk of government ECD expenditure going to ECD centre-based programmes, this means the majority of young children are not adequately provided for.

The study found there was an unequal distribution of ECD services, skewed in favour of urban communities.

This is concerning, considering that 44% of South Africa’s children live in rural households according to Statistics South Africa data analysed by the Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town. It is important to address this imbalance through equitable distribution of funds for ECD services across all areas of the country to ensure universal access. The implementation guidelines support the new National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy. Importantly, this policy will only work optimally with adequate funding and co-ordinating mechanisms in place.

Universal access to quality ECD services for young children is urgent and a main determinant for the sustainable, democratic future of South Africa. In addition to the social and educational benefits, ECD can result in substantial economic benefits to society.

It is the intention that implementation guidelines support the government’s efforts to achieve universal, quality ECD provision for South Africa’s children as outlined in the National Development Plan 2030, and will contribute to improved quality of children’s lives and increase their opportunities for healthy growth and development.

Van Niekerk and Ashley-Cooper, with Professor Eric Atmore from the University of Cape Town, Department of Social Development, are the authors of the research report. It is available at www.eecd.org.za