

# Early Childhood Development as a Strategy to Eradicate Poverty and Reduce Inequality



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Poverty and inequality impact negatively on millions of people in urban and rural communities in South Africa. This has a particularly devastating effect on children and their families in these impoverished communities since it deprives them of their socio-economic rights and results in inadequate access to health care, education, social services and nutrition. As well as turning childhood into a time of adversity, it undermines the healthy development of the child. This has led former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to say, “poverty is the major obstacle to the realisation of children’s rights.”

Growing up in extreme poverty, wherever you live, has many consequences. The most immediate of these include a propensity for illness, stunted growth, delayed cognitive development, poor nutrition and general lethargy.

One initiative which overcomes the effects of poverty is the provision of good quality early childhood development (ECD) programmes for young children, together with support for their families. Research in South Africa, and internationally, indicates that the early years are critical for development. The research shows that quality early childhood care, education and development leads to higher levels of social, emotional, cognitive and physical well-being in young children. These in turn lead to significant social and economic benefits for the country.

Globally, quality ECD opportunities for children are recognised as the foundation for success in life. The early years are recognised as the appropriate phase for young children to acquire the values, behaviour and attitudes which are important for the building of a peaceful, prosperous and democratic society.

Early and appropriate provisioning and interventions for children at risk can reverse the effects of deprivation and make it possible for children to grow and develop to their full potential, thus reducing the need for costly remedial interventions to address developmental lag and social problems later in life. Therefore, in order to overcome poverty and inequality in the most effective way, South Africa needs a much greater investment at the level that produces the greatest social and economic return: early childhood development.

## Why Early Childhood Development?

Although economic opportunities are a key factor in poverty reduction, with economic growth contributing significantly to the reduction of poverty throughout a country (May et al. 1998), it cannot alone reduce inequality in the short or medium term; several areas of

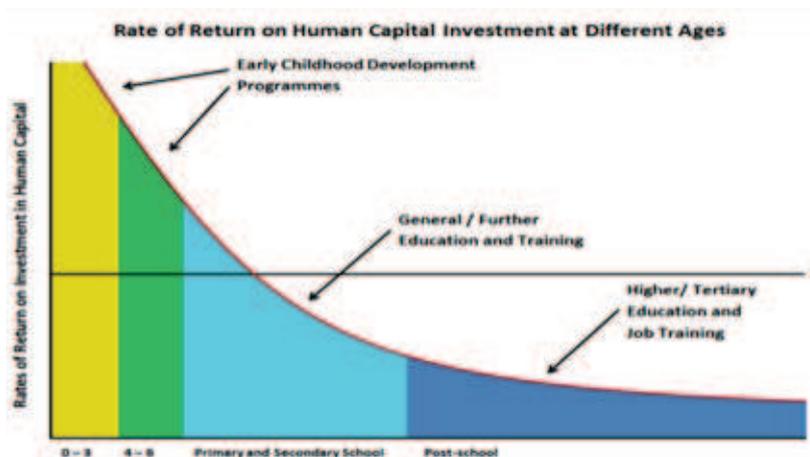


Figure 1. Rate of Return on Investment across Various Age Categories (Adapted from Carneiro & Heckman, 2003).

action are needed in order to reduce inequality.

Firstly, investment in education has long been recognised as a primary route to reducing poverty and inequality. Whilst South Africa has one of the highest rates of public investment in education in the world (SAInfo, 2012) public spending in the critical early years is lowest. Nationally, less than 2% of government spending (Departments of Social Development and Education) is spent on children aged five and younger (*Children Now*, 2011).

In terms of return on investment, recent studies have shown that focussed investment into Early Childhood Development programmes yields an “extraordinary return, far exceeding the return on most investments...” (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). Investment in ECD breeds economic success, not only in terms of those beneficiaries being educated; the ECD work force being trained and supported, and children provided with quality ECD stimulation and programming, but also for the overall economy as a whole. This economic success is the basis for a reduction in poverty and inequality.

More specifically, effective ECD interventions provide economic opportunities for the practitioners who are trained (by providing quality teacher, leadership and governance training) thereby affecting short and medium term economic growth. Through training, ECD interventions provide beneficiaries with the chance to become teachers and social

entrepreneurs, managing their own small enterprises. Indeed, more than 24 000 ECD centres have been established without government financial support. Each one of these centres has been set up and financed by entrepreneurial women in their communities, with the majority of ECD centres established in Kwazulu-Natal, Gauteng, Eastern Cape and the Western Cape. Although each of these ECD centres is run as a small social enterprise, they are currently not accessing the support provided to SMEs. But more than just providing this form of economic empowerment, ECD interventions provide a safe environment that stimulates learning for the children involved, creating a solid foundation for the work-force of the future.

But what programmes are available to bring about these outcomes?

**Components of successful ECD interventions**

Quality teaching and learning is essential for effective early development to take place. In order to produce quality ECD teachers (often called ECD practitioners), various training and education opportunities are made available through full ECD qualifications. The NQF Level 4 ECD practitioner qualification provides teachers with the necessary skills to meet the basic needs of young children in all areas of their development (physical, mental, emotional, and social), to facilitate the

holistic development of young children (including those children with special needs), and offer quality ECD services in a variety of settings. The NQF Level 5 ECD practitioner qualification provides ECD practitioners with the necessary skills to use their experience and knowledge in ECD to further their professional practice, and specialise in a particular area of ECD. This might include managing a community-based ECD centre or independent pre-school.

Those who obtain the full Level 4 or 5 qualifications can apply to register with the South African Council of Educators, and at Level 5 they can be employed to teach in a public school, but only in the reception class (or pre-school classes if they exist). In order to teach older children they must achieve a qualification at a Higher Education Institute.

There are also organisations which provide training for ECD governing body members and supervisors who are responsible for the ECD centres’ leadership and management. This is often offered in the form of a series of workshops which focus on financial management, human resource management, fundraising, subsidies, fee policy, maintaining administrative systems and ensuring sustainability of the ECD centre. Centres are supported and assisted to register with the Department of Social Development and to obtain the per capita ECD subsidy from the Department.

For an ECD centre to become registered it is essential that it meets the minimum standards as determined by provincial government departments and the local authority. It is essential that ECD centres provide a safe and secure environment for young children. To this end, advice and assistance can be given relating to renovations and upgrades to ECD centres which must be carried out so that the centres can meet the minimum physical standards and requirements.

Educational equipment is a vital component in offering a quality early learning environment to young children. Play is a means for the growth of the child’s physical, social, cognitive, emotional, social and moral development. The provision of age-appropriate educational equipment

to ECD centres and training for ECD teachers on the effective use of educational equipment is essential.

Due to the fact that there is minimal provision for children with special needs in South Africa, compounded by the fact that South Africa has a high prevalence of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, a series of training workshops on the inclusion of children with special needs is of great benefit to ECD centres.

Such workshops equip ECD teachers with the knowledge and basic skills required to successfully integrate children with special needs into their playrooms and learning environments.

### **Family Outreach Programmes and Playgroups**

Family outreach programmes involve the provision of ECD services within a home. Family outreach workers (also referred to as Family or Community Motivators) work with a number of families in a community and visit each family for a set amount of time each week or month (depending on the nature of the specific programme). During a home visit, the family outreach worker works directly with the caregiver sharing knowledge on how to provide early learning stimulation and provides information on various other important topics such health, safety and nutrition. The family outreach worker also works directly with the children in their homes; demonstrating to the caregiver the various activities which can be done at home to stimulate early learning, and providing the children with a foundation for their early development. These programmes aim to empower parents and primary caregivers to provide early learning opportunities to their own children. The intention of the family outreach programme is that parents continue to provide these early learning activities and opportunities to their children after the completion of the programme.

Playgroups provide ECD services within a community setting or informal gathering. A fieldworker works with a group of parents and children on early learning activities on a session basis in a local park, in a residential home or at a community hall. The sessions focus mainly on the education activities that

the parents can do in the home with their children. A playgroup allows for information sharing to take place between the primary caregivers and provides a space for supporting them, as well as encouraging the parents/caregivers to support one another. These programmes also allow for children who usually do not interact with many other children, to interact in larger groups, on shared activities.

Although these project components can be provided independently, they are far more effective when combined as an integrated package as they address the ECD challenges in a holistic manner. Much research has shown that the best way to provide ECD programmes to children, and thus give them the best possible start in life, is by offering them an integrated approach to ECD (Department of Education, Department of Social Development, Department of Health & UNICEF, 2005).

Currently, the Department of Social Development (DoSD) provides some support to non-centre based ECD programmes, but this is on a very small scale and is not across all provinces. The programmes are almost always initiated by community members or NGOs, and supported by NGOs who obtain funding either from the DoSD or donors. A number of NGOs in South Africa provide programmes such as these, including Khululeka, Ntataise, Tree, ELRU, Grassroots, the Foundation for Community Work and the Centre for Early Childhood Development.

### **Assisting ECD centres to obtain the provincial government subsidy**

One of the major barriers preventing young children from accessing ECD centres are the various costs involved. Should ECD centres receive the provincial government per capita subsidy of R15.00 per child per day, centres would be able to increase access for many young children. Moreover, receiving the government subsidy helps ECD centres to become financially sustainable. For example, an ECD centre with 40 children can access approximately R 150,000 each year. There are, however, some significant barriers preventing ECD centres from accessing the ECD subsidy. These

barriers mainly stem from the costs involved in ECD centres meeting the minimum standards as set out by DoSD; in order to register with the DoSD; with costly infrastructure upgrades and re-zoning often needed. Once registered (a prerequisite for receiving the subsidy), many ECD centres need to be assisted in the various processes involved in obtaining this subsidy, which itself is limited to provincial budget allocations.

### **Nutrition**

Due to the extraordinarily high prevalence of poverty in South Africa, hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity are significant challenges facing children in communities across the country. In terms of learning, research has shown that malnutrition and hunger greatly affect a child's ability to concentrate, focus attention, and perform complex tasks (Wildeman & Mbebetho, 2005). The negative consequences of malnutrition affect children's ability to achieve their full potential, stunting not only the child's ability to flourish in adulthood, but collectively limiting the country's potential development (McNeil & Donald, 2006).

The long-lasting effects of inadequate nutrition put significant additional stress on the health care expenditures of a country. Improving nutrition, through various interventions, can therefore bring about not only health and education benefits to children, but economic benefits to the country as a whole.

Nutrition programmes, such as the feeding schemes provided at primary schools for schools in the lowest 3 quintiles, are vital for the holistic development of children from birth to 5 years of age. Interventions include feeding schemes, the provision of deficient micronutrients through fortified sachet powders/pap to homes and community-based ECD facilities, the facilitation and start-up of food gardens, as well as skills development and training on nutrition and agricultural development.

Children attending ECD programmes in public schools are most likely to receive their nutrition through the National School Nutrition Programme

(NSNP), whereas food for children from registered and subsidised community-based ECD facilities is supposed to be funded through the DoSD per capita ECD subsidy. However, this per capita subsidy is not ring-fenced for feeding (unlike the NSNP), and is also used for administration and personnel costs (HSRC, 2009). Therefore optimal nutritional meal provision is not guaranteed in these ECD centres. Children who are not in any form of ECD provisioning are even more at risk of not receiving adequate nutrition.

### Impact

The Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD) provides a good example of the impact of such a multi-faceted approach. It has offered integrated interventions, in various forms, for the past eighteen (18) years, working throughout South Africa. To illustrate this, one of many such projects involved a range of interventions for five ECD centres in the disadvantaged area of Greater Lavender Hill. The project directly impacted on three hundred and fifty (350) children in these ECD centres. The following are some quotes in this regard:

- "Yes there is a big change...like when a baby is born, before you learn to walk, they found us in a state of a baby learning to crawl and they help us a lot...it cleared up our minds a lot!...We didn't have enough resources, but now there is a big change, even if we didn't have, we try to create, to work on what we have. Let's say we don't have paintbrushes, we use sponges, but now the project has helped us...we have brighter things, colourful things and the children are so happy... you can see the classrooms have changed!" - Nontutuzelo Mroxiso, Little Lambs Educare
- "Definitely a boost! Teachers got to connect with other staff, networking with workshops made them realise they are not isolated, there is support, they could connect with the community and community development as well, share ideas and implement it in the classrooms." - Faranaaz Johnson, Rainbow Educare
- "They did what they said they would

do...to get us to stand up on our own feet...teacher now has eagerness in her face...more options, there is enough activities to keep them [learners] busy for the whole day! Yes it has changed, but will continue to change, but at the moment it is working." - Cynthia Lewis, Vrygond Capricorn Children's Centre

In terms of financial management, each ECD centre made big strides. Nontutuzelo Mroxiso of Little Lambs Educare reports, "It has changed a lot, as the time goes on, more ideas come and as we go to the workshops, more ideas come; now separating books - petty cash book, income/expenditure, and keeping slips helped us a lot."

Regarding professional changes, Joanne Jackson of Kaalvoet Educare reported, "I've become more motivated, excited...I want our school to become a model in Lavender Hill, our school must be a model!" Cindy Engelbrecht stated, "We do everything professionally now as if we are expecting a visit...keep everything in order, and we have an open door policy."

Nontutuzelo Mroxiso further elaborates by saying, "Yes, this project has helped us a lot in terms of infrastructure, before a shack with no ceiling and the wind was coming in, but they helped with that. Now it's nice, brighter than it was before. They put the flushing toilets for us and ventilation. It was dark before, but now better, sun and air coming in. There is a lot of change!" Faranaaz Johnson also explains, "The classroom first of all, that is the biggest upgrade we could have hoped for...and equipment that was bought, quality of toys are durable... the atmosphere it sets for kids and teachers." Chrissandra Lewis of Vrygond Capricorn Children's Centre states, "My mind is different now," and also says she is more confident.

In terms of ECD specific changes, with regards to the quality of the early learning activities, all practitioners expressed significant positive changes experienced. Yusfa Mckie of Burning Bush Educare stated, "Yes, they have learned more things and gotten more things to help them... it's been a great help!" Chrissandra Lewis of Vrygond Capricorn Children's Centre adds,

"Things in the classroom...we're getting things we need because we didn't have the finances before, they've helped!"

In terms of practitioner/learner interaction, all respondents expressed that the relationships have become much better since the inception of the project. Thelma Fritz of Kaalvoet Educare noted, "It's much better, the interactions. You can see the changes, they are accepting more things, they are settling in better with other children." Chrissandra Lewis of Vrygond Capricorn Children's Centre comments, "They listen to me more, they understand more, I listen to them more, makes it easier." Yusfa Mckie of Burning Bush Educare also stated, "You treat your class like you treat your family at home, you make them yours." The overall communication has certainly improved.

On a personal level, all practitioners felt as though they had enhanced their ability and capacity. In the community sense, respondents indicated they have a new outlook on children in the community as well as their own family members who are young. It all indicates positive changes for the better. This is only one example of the effect that a focused integrated ECD intervention can have on a community. South Africa needs many more such interventions to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality. ■

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