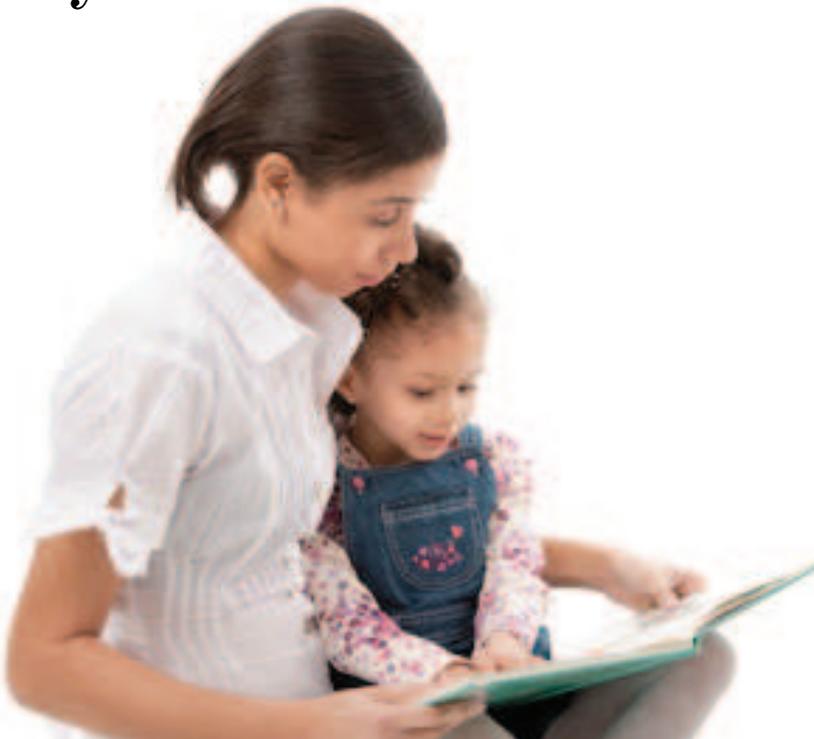


Celebrating those who rise to the challenges of implementing early childhood education



We pay tribute to the many, many thousands of women who, against all odds and despite having very little support, care for and educate our youngest children each day.

By Michaela Ashley-Cooper and Lauren Van Niekerk

It is five in the morning and the smell of porridge fills the rooms of the small house in the slowly waking township of Xola Naledi, in Grabouw, Western Cape. Benita Garnet is getting herself and her three children – aged 6, 10 and 15 – ready for school, and makes sure her husband, who is ill, gets his medication. It's not very long before she hears a knock on her front door and when she opens it a little boy stands at the entrance. His grandmother kisses him goodbye and sends him inside. Benita hands him his bowl of porridge and waits for the sound of other small footsteps outside on her

veranda. Invariably more toddlers arrive before sunrise, their mothers entrusting them in Benita's care while most of them make their way to work.

When all the children have arrived, they will enjoy music, play with blocks and try their hand at colouring in, and before long it will be lunchtime. Then it is sleep time, followed by outdoor play. This is a typical day at Benita's Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre.

While it started in 2007 with one small child, today Benita's centre has between 12 and 15 children. "I was tired of working for others," says Benita of her motivation for starting

her centre. "Today I am proud to be working for myself. I have a passion for what I do and running this care group is my dream."

Always keen to learn more about child development, Benita regularly attends training, broadening her knowledge, and she is reaping the benefits. "Before, I saw my role with the children as being there to keep them away from harm's way. I thought it was childish to play with them, but as soon as I interacted with them I was surprised to see them learning," says Benita. "Now I encourage the children to learn through play. Educating and helping them is what preoccupies me because I want them to make something of their lives." Benita says that the training has given her the skills required to provide the children with a quality early learning environment and a chance at a better quality of life than her parents were able to give her. "I want to give them everything that I can. That's why they must learn; so that one day they can also run their own businesses and not be dependent on someone else."

This story is just one example of the strong South African women who have overcome significant obstacles in order to care for the children in their communities. In doing so, these women bring about social change in a fundamental way and are the foundation for our country's early education.

There are currently more than 60,000 women working in ECD centres throughout South Africa; this means that over 60,000 jobs have been independently created at no cost to government. This is a significant accomplishment and something that should be celebrated. However, the early childhood development sector in South Africa faces a multitude of challenges; underpaid teachers, unemployed parents, hungry children, and unsafe early learning environments are a few of the obstacles caregivers and children experience every day.

According to figures reported in the Child Gauge 2012, in 2010 it was estimated that children constitute 37% of South Africa's population (18.5 million children 18 years and under, and 6.5 million children 6 years and

under), with 60% of our children living in abject poverty (household income below R575 per month). This figure has declined steadily since 2003, partially due to the reach of the Child Support Grant, which currently supports more than 11 million children. The official mortality rate of our youngest and most vulnerable citizens is a distressing 56 deaths per 1000 live births. Approximately 450,000 children under the age of 15 years are HIV-positive and 3 million children reside in homes that reported child hunger.

Whilst South Africa has high levels of school enrolment and attendance in Grades 1 – 12, with an attendance rate of 97% in 2010, the quality of education in our country is poor and there are still approximately 350,000 children across South Africa who are not attending school. By March 2012, 734,654 children were enrolled in Grade R classes; and 836,000 children were in 19,500 registered ECD centres nationwide with 488,000 of these (58%) receiving the ECD subsidy from the provincial Departments of Social Development. However, there are still approximately 5.5 million children not exposed to any form of early learning programme (84% of those children 6 years and under).

To add to this continually evolving and expanding sector, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) recently announced that it plans to increase preschool education from the current one year of Grade R to two years. This goal, in line with the proposals put forth in the National Development Plan (NDP), is commendable, but achieving it will be challenging.

So what does the NDP propose for South Africa's youngest children? Concrete proposals include the introduction of a nutrition programme for pregnant women and young children; and extended ECD services for all children under six. More specifically, the plan aims to ensure "universal access to quality early childhood development for children aged 0–3..." and make "2 years of quality preschool enrolment for 4 and 5 year olds compulsory before Grade 1" (NPC, 2012).

However, the plan does not state what exactly government means by

this, and what can be done in order to achieve this by 2030.

From our experience, the main challenge in ECD today is to increase access to and improve the quality of ECD programmes. Whilst the NDP supports this, there are numerous challenges when working towards making this a reality. An initial issue is that the NDP's actual aims are unclear, as the terminology used differs across the document; terms and phrases such as "early childhood development provision", "preschool education" and "early childhood development exposure", "universal access to Early Childhood Development" are used interchangeably. In reality these are very different, and thus the plan is confusing in what it aims to achieve.

The proposal for compulsory two years of preschool enrolment brings with it significant challenges in implementation; the most immediate of which is the cost involved in extending Grade R to two years. To extend Grade R to include an additional year for children aged 4 and 5 at least, an extra 33,400 ECD classes will need to be established by 2030. The building and equipment alone, at a conservative estimate of R 400,000 per class, would cost government R 13.4 billion at today's Rand value. Added to this, the recruitment and training of an additional 33,400 ECD teachers will be required. If these teachers were to earn a modest salary of R 5,000 per month, the cost to government would be a further R 2 billion in teacher's salaries per year, again at today's Rand value.

For young children, research has shown that a comprehensive range of ECD interventions, beginning in pregnancy and carried out throughout a child's life, produce the best results. This includes prenatal support to mothers, support for caregivers and families, care and cognitive stimulation for children, and preparation for children transitioning into formal schooling. Interestingly, the NDP asserts that, "the state is responsible for ensuring that all vulnerable families receive a comprehensive package of early childhood development services." A comprehensive package

would need to include a number of ECD interventions.

These interventions should include: quality ECD teacher training; governing body and supervisor leadership and management training; infrastructure upgrades; educational equipment provision and training; as well as out-of-centre ECD outreach programmes, such as family home-visiting programmes, and the facilitation of community play groups. Such interventions were discussed in more detail in *The Thinker* Volume 53, July 2013.

More specifically, to produce quality ECD teachers, far more ECD practitioner training at NQF Levels 4 and 5, providing teachers with the essential skills to work with young children effectively, is required. And these Level 4 and 5 qualifications should be recognised by the DBE and the South African Council of Educators (SACE) as teaching qualifications which can be upgraded by Higher Education Institutions into primary school teacher qualifications for those who wish to follow this career path.

Whilst the NDP is very attractive on paper, and the Department of Basic Education's aims are commendable and, if achieved, will bring great benefits to our youngest children and their families, we must bear in mind Chairperson of the National Planning Commission, Minister Trevor Manuel's words (at the launch of the Child Gauge 2012) when he said, "Collectively, as a society we are in neglect... If politics fail, we have to ask where the rest of society is, in dealing with these kinds of challenges... Now that we know the facts, what are we (as a society) going to do about it? ... We have to take collective responsibility for taking these issues forward."

As we celebrate women's day this month, we pay tribute to the many, many thousands of women who, against all odds and despite having very little support, care for and educate our youngest children each day. They are true nation builders and we salute them. ■

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