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LEGO Deep Dive 2022

Final Report

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Data For Social Impact

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
CEF	Cognitive and Executive Functioning
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DoE	Department of Education
DoH	Department of Health
DSD	Department of Social Development
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ELDA	Early Learning Development Area
ELL	Emergent Literacy and Language
ELOM	Early Learning Outcomes Measure
ELP	Early Learning Programme
ENM	Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics
FGD	Focus Group Discussion

Abbreviation	Description
FMCVMI	Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration
GMD	Gross Motor Development
HFA	Height for Age
HLE	Home Learning Environment
LMICs	Low- and Middle-Income Countries
LOLT	Language of Learning and Teaching
LPQA	Learning Programme Quality Assessment
NCF	National Curriculum Framework Birth to Four Years
NELDS	National Early Learning and Development Standards
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPO	Non-Profit Organisation
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PLAY	Playful Learning Across the Years
PQA	Programme Quality Assessment
QASS	Quality Assurance and Support System
RTO	Resource and Training Organisation
SACE	South African Council for Educators

Abbreviation	Description
SARAECE	SA Research Association for Early Childhood Education
SASSA	South African Social Security Agency
SEF	Social-Emotional Functioning
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SGB	School Governing Body
SIAS	Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNISA	University of South Africa

Executive Summary

Introduction

In April 2022, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) took over the leadership and coordination of Early Childhood Development (ECD) from the Department of Social Development (DSD) in South Africa, aiming to enhance early education outcomes in line with the National Development Plan Vision 2030. To assess the availability, accessibility, and quality of ECD services, the DBE conducted multiple projects. Nationwide projects such as the census of Early Learning Programmes (ELPs) and Thrive by Five which collected child-level outcome data using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) were rolled out. Despite these efforts, a deeper understanding of barriers and mechanisms for achieving quality ECD education, curriculum implementation and positive child outcomes is required.

The ECD Deep Dive study employs a mixed methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, to address this gap and provide insights that can guide improvements in ECD programmes and ultimately child development outcomes. This approach involves both qualitative and quantitative research methods, offering diverse perspectives and insights into ELPs and their impact on child development. The study's objectives offer a current perspective on curriculum implementation, play-based learning, inclusive practices, capacities of practitioners, parent-practitioner relationships, referral pathways, professional development and support, monitoring mechanisms and the relationship between programme quality and child outcomes. To achieve these objectives, the study is organised around five themes, addressing a total of 17 research questions. These findings intend to equip policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders with practical and implementable information and recommendations to enhance early childhood education (ECE) in South Africa.

The quantitative component involves a diverse sample of 50 ELPs selected from four provinces in South Africa. Data collection included practitioner interviews, classroom observations, child assessments, principal/manager/matron interviews and parent/caregiver interviews. Quantitative data analysis employed descriptive and inferential statistics to describe the sample and respond to research questions by theme. The qualitative segment focuses on seven ELPs chosen as in-depth case studies. These case studies provide deeper insights into a sample of high- and low-performing ELPs (according to learning environment and ELOM scores) within different provinces. Stakeholder interviews were also conducted, involving national, provincial, and local entities involved in ECD. Qualitative interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted. Findings from both arms of the study were synthesised iteratively, integrating qualitative insights with quantitative results for comprehensive understanding.

Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and other Curricula

NCF Implementation

Practitioners universally engage in planning activities guided by lesson plans and external resources, frequently supplied by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Despite uneven familiarity and adoption of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) as reported by stakeholders, most ELPs surveyed claim that they implement the NCF. However, disparities emerge, with low-performing case study sites displaying limited comprehension of the intention of the NCF. Stakeholders view the curriculum as generic and somewhat inflexible, resulting in a lack of focus on a tailored approach, Early Learning Development Area (ELDAs), and inclusivity. However, in-person observations reveal ELPs moderately integrating the NCF's key dimensions, which is especially evident in high-performing case study sites prioritising social-emotional development. Though practitioners recognise diversity and inclusivity, challenges persist in fully realising these ideals, as language inclusivity lags behind reported intentions.

Barriers: Challenges in implementation arise from inadequate classroom space, large class sizes, mixed-age groups, and punctuality issues. The NCF's breadth, complexity, and standardisation pose obstacles to implementation. Limited access to NCF templates, play resources, and equipment further hinders implementation. In addition, parental expectations sometimes contradict NCF principles, which can be challenging for practitioners to navigate.

Enablers: Successful implementation is supported by sufficient staff and well-structured classes based on age and phase. User-friendly template guidelines ease adoption of the NCF. Improved access to equipment, assistance from NGOs, and availability of training materials bolster implementation. Effective management of parental expectations is also an enabling factor.

Play-based Learning and Child Agency

Stakeholders express concerns about practitioners' limited understanding of play-based learning and child agency, hindering children's autonomy and developmental potential. Implementation varies, with high-performing case study sites fostering an environment conducive to play-based learning and child agency, while low-performing sites lean towards teacher-directed activities. Child agency is primarily encouraged through feedback and suggestions, while tools for problem-solving and encouragement to persevere are less common. Recognising the importance of balance, case study sites emphasise maintaining structure and boundaries alongside promoting child play and agency.

Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

Concerns regarding the access and inclusion of children with disabilities are expressed by ECD stakeholders, while in contrast, ELPs report practising inclusion. The most common disabilities

recognised at ELPs are related to communication, walking, and behaviour. ECD stakeholders perceive there being limited capacity to identify and address disabilities, though high-performing case study sites are more confident in handling such cases due to training, and closer contact with parents. Even so these too requested greater DBE support for inclusion. Training, provisions, and referral pathways for children with disabilities are limited. Continuous support, training, and resources for ELPs in dealing with disabilities are necessary, and stakeholders recommend greater involvement of DBE Inclusion Teams.

Recommendations

In the short- to medium-term, ongoing NCF training should be made more practical and include on-site support. Training should emphasise NCF implementation for babies and toddlers as well as mixed age groups, play pedagogy and the play continuum, how to enable free choice and problem solving, and how to accommodate individual children's needs through ongoing informal assessment. In addition, distribution of the more detailed curriculum support materials developed for DBE and Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) technical assistance, should be fast-tracked and starter play-kits provided for poorly-resourced classes. The DBE Inclusion Directorate and their ECD Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) partners should engage in widespread training and support for ELPs to include children with disabilities, provide adequate individual education plans and liaise with parents about their children's needs.

Theme 2: Quality of Practitioners and Learning Environment

Capacity of ELP Practitioners

Approximately half of practitioners and principals hold matric-level education and possess National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 4 certification, and principals generally have higher educational qualifications. ECD Stakeholders stress the need for increased professional development, including formal NCF training, to bolster confidence and comprehension of play-based learning. Recommendations for enhancing professional development encompass tailored training approaches, stronger in-field support, and the establishment of collaborative Communities of Practice. Factors like intrinsic motivation, passion, and supportive work environments are closely linked to effective teaching practices. Challenges within the work environment such as poor salaries, fatigue as teaching performance.

Recommendations

To address the gap in ECD qualifications and provision for ongoing professional development in the short- to medium-term, professional learning circles should be encouraged as a platform and the Quality Assurance and Support System (QASS) framework and support package should be finalised and implemented with urgency. In the longer-term, professionalisation of ELP staff should be supported through financial support for training of practitioners and managers, including the Higher certificate and Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education (I as well as occupational qualifications. Different formats for training delivery, such as virtual and in-person, should be offered to make training more readily accessible. To improve ELP working conditions, the grant-in-aid subsidy should be increased to allow for adequate and consistent wages for staff.

Theme 3: Parental Engagement and Access to Auxiliary Services

Parent-ELP Relationships

ELPs employ diverse communication channels to reach parents, and high-performing case study sites, in particular, excel in communication and parental involvement. Communication challenges cited by national respondents include differences in curriculum beliefs, staff approachability, and parental apathy. Low parental involvement can be attributed to work commitments, disinterest, age-related limitations, financial constraints, and illness. Despite this, ELPs recognise the significance of parent engagement and, to varying degrees, actively involve parents through meetings, extracurricular activities, and fundraising. However, ELPs share that enhanced parental support remains necessary for the effective daily functioning of ELPs.

Supporting Parents with Child Learning

ELPs employ various methods to support parents, including meetings, workshops and open days. While positive examples of parent support initiatives exist, widespread national parenting programmes are underutilised. National respondents emphasise the need for comprehensive parent support, covering child development discussions alongside operational issues. Despite existing mechanisms, parents express a desire for more information.

Referral Pathways

While concerns exist about ELPs' referral capacity, the ELPs report experience with referrals and record-keeping. Common referrals encompass health services, social workers, and birth registration, with fewer for nutrition or disabilities. Challenges accessing services due to staffing shortages, particularly in rural locations, lead to delays, despite governmental efforts to support

referral pathways. Broaching referrals with parents is delicate, as acknowledging disabilities or difficulties can be challenging. ELPs typically have strategies in place to navigate these sensitive discussions but request more departmental support.

Recommendations

ELPs should be assisted on an ongoing basis to communicate with parents about the learning programme/curriculum, the value of play for early learning, and their role in supporting early learning at home, including suggested activities and resources. ELPs should be capacitated to understand their role as a referral point to assist with grants, birth certificates, health and social services and developmental delays and disabilities. A referral and tracking system through provincial/district ECD coordination structures should be established. DBE and other public and NGO ECD stakeholders should cooperate to make parenting information available and link ELPs to parent capacitation programmes including apps.

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

ELP Programme Engagement

ELPs actively engage in various platforms, underscoring their commitment to professional growth, staying informed and sector collaboration. A substantial majority participate in ECD Forums, with additional memberships in the SA Congress for ECD, and other platforms such as Communities of Practice , Professional Learning Communities, and Facebook groups.

Training and Support

Most ELPs have staff development plans and demonstrate commitment to staff development by leveraging diverse channels for training on NCF implementation, including district DBE officials, training organisations, ELP forums, and NGOs. National respondents advocate for a blended learning approach, including in-person and virtual methods. Collaborative efforts between government and support organisations are highlighted as an effective means to establish shared standards, tools, and principles, streamlining support and preventing conflicting information.

Internal Mechanisms for Guidance and Mentoring

ELPs employ internal quality monitoring mechanisms to enhance quality, although concerns by national respondents exist regarding the capacity of managers or principals in conducting these activities. Guidance and mentoring are widespread, with ELPs benefiting from support provided by principals, senior staff members, and School Governing Bodies (SGBs). Such support encompasses clear reporting structures, reflective sessions, collaborative planning, observations, and knowledge sharing. Moreover, most ELPs report that professional

development opportunities, including workshops, ECD Forum inputs, financial support, conferences, and discussion groups, are accessible. However, releasing practitioners for in-service training may be challenging and the ECD Forum inputs are often compliance related.

External Quality Monitoring Mechanisms

External quality monitoring involves multiple stakeholders, including the DBE, DSD, NGOs, training organisations, and municipalities. However, the migration of officials from the DSD to DBE has created a need for capacity building. Further, there is concern about a lack of uniformity in approach and interpretation of the NCF due to different monitoring and planning templates in use. Although the DBE is the body who conducts monitoring visits most frequently, the rate of visits in 2022 was limited, leaving a gap in support. Partnerships with NGOs are deemed vital for support on compliance, infrastructure and resources. Notably, one high-performing ELP case study site received no official monitoring or support from any government sector in the last seven years, highlighting a need for more comprehensive monitoring efforts.

Recommendations

Short- to medium-term recommendations include establishing common standards and guidelines for curriculum support to align NPO and DBE guidance and ensuring that provincial education department staff who were previously attached to social development are adequately capacitated on the ECD curriculum and its implementation. In addition, it is recommended to develop a collaborative, multipronged plan for ongoing guidance, mentoring and support for ELPs including official monitoring visits, utilisation of ECD NPOs and ECD forums. The development of Professional Learning Communities to promote reflection and self-monitoring for quality improvement should be piloted. Finally, local government responsibilities regarding ECD infrastructure support and in providing support against crime should be clarified.

In the medium- to long-term, budget allocations should be motivated for sufficient provincial or outsourced ECD Resource and Training Organisation (RTO) staff to support quality improvement and to allow for immediate support and monitoring of all sites.

Theme 5: Centre and Child Outcomes

Outcomes: Centre and Child

Key areas impact programme outcomes include development domains, language usage, practitioner environment, teacher-learner interactions, classroom resources, home learning environment (HLE), and caregivers' education. Principals recognise the importance of various development domains. While ELPs claim language diversity, actual use is limited, impacting language inclusivity. Practitioner effectiveness is influenced by factors such as class size,

salaries, working hours, and attendance. Teacher-learner interactions involve connecting experiences to real-world encounters, encouraging problem-solving, providing feedback, and fostering child agency. Positive environments are created through engagement, ubuntu, and participation encouragement. Classroom resources are varied, but some areas like sensory play and fantasy are underutilised. Caregivers' active engagement in home learning activities is common, with diverse educational backgrounds.

Relationship between Tools and Outcomes

Teacher-conducted Gross Motor Development (GMD) focused activities emerge as a significant predictor of ELOM outcomes, influencing children's 'On track' status across all domains. Positive Emotional Climate and Agency scores from Playful Learning Across the Years (PLAY) tool Classroom Observations, along with ELP fees over R110 per month, are also predictive of children being 'On track'. While GMD-focused activities hold promise for child development, further research is needed due to study sample limitations before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

Deep Dive Case Studies

The deep dive case studies provide examples of how quality early learning is achieved. Strict adherence to the NCF itself on paper is less significant than the embodiment of these principles through teaching and interactive practices. Common characteristics of the five high-performing case study sites include warm relationships between staff and a holistic curriculum that is adapted to meet individual needs and allows for free and structured play and independent problem solving. In addition, the use of local and indigenous content supports home-to-school transition and diversity.

Additional factors supporting quality delivery include qualified and motivated teaching staff with access to continuing professional development, teamwork and internal monitoring, highly engaged parents and referral processes. However, even in these high performing sites, some training and support gaps still exist, resulting in lack of widespread NCF training and requests for more implementation support. There is also a lack of appropriate learning programmes for baby and toddler classes. Principals requested management training and more support to identify, inform parents and provide suitable programmes for children with disabilities. However, work stressors such as long working hours, low salaries, the administrative burden of compliance, water shortages and vulnerability to theft reduces time available for principals to focus on learning programmes.

These case studies highlight how the entire support ecosystem is critical for high quality ELP delivery. Therefore, it is recommended to focus on establishing effective local level coordination of ECD regulatory, training and support stakeholders to ensure that all ELPs receive all necessary assistance for ongoing programme quality improvement.

Introduction

Background

In April 2022, the coordination of the ECD sector moved from the DSD to the DBE. This was aimed at improving early education outcomes as prioritised in the National Development Plan Vision 2030. To provide a better understanding of the availability, accessibility and quality of ECD services in South Africa, and assist with data-driven planning for the sector, the LEGO Foundation and DBE have partnered on a number of ECD data and systems-building projects. A nationwide census of ELPs was conducted in 2021/2022 [1]. A nationally representative sample of ELPs were also visited to collect child-level outcome data using the ELOM during the Thrive by Five study in 2021 [2]. This data informed the Thrive by Five index which indicates the proportion of children 'on track' for early learning and development.

Although these studies provided data to inform planning, further exploration on the barriers and enabling mechanisms to achieve quality education and positive child outcomes is warranted. The ECD Deep Dive mixed methods study aims to address this gap and inform policymakers', educators' and other stakeholders' decision making to improve the quality of ECD programmes and the development of young children.

Literature Review

To inform the development of a framework for the study, a literature review was undertaken of relevant South African ECD policy and associated guidelines regarding early learning as well as the evidence of factors associated with ELP quality and child learning and development outcomes.

Legal and Policy Framework

The National Development Plan Vision 2030 [3], which outlines the country's long-term strategic plan and vision for 2030, elevates ECD as an education sector priority among the measures to improve the quality of education and long-term prospects of future generations. To achieve this, the plan provides for a policy and programme shift to ensure that the DBE takes the core responsibility for the provision and monitoring of ECD from April 2022 onwards. The National Integrated ECD Policy [4], ratified by cabinet in 2015, provides for a comprehensive, holistic service package for young children and in respect of opportunities for learning, the goal is:

By 2030, to provide a universally available comprehensive quality age and developmental stage appropriate opportunities for learning for all children from birth until they enter formal school, which lay the foundations for optimal early learning, inclusion and the socio-emotional, physical, intellectual and language development of young children through play and other related, recognised methods for early learning, as well as safe daily care in the absence of their parents and/or primary caregivers. (p 59)

In 2015, South Africa adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, including the relevant indicator: to ensure that all boys and girls have access to quality ECD care and pre-primary education, so they are ready for primary education by 2030.

The other key quality-related guideline is the ECD Programme Regulation Framework, based on the regulations, norms and standards of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 as amended. These have been arranged into a checklist with requirements for conditional ECD registration and full ECD registration. All types of ECD programmes are required to register.

Curriculum Development

DBE and DHET are responsible for curriculum development and training of practitioners working in the ECD sector. The NCF for Children Birth to Four Years [5] provides an organising, but non-prescriptive, guideline for the delivery of programmes to young children. The NCF describes the aims for:

- children's development and learning which need to be used as guidelines for supporting children's holistic development and assessment of their progress and potential; and
- adults who are facilitating children's learning by planning high quality experiences and reflecting on and evaluating their performance.

The NCF is organised into six ELDAs including well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring mathematics, creativity and knowledge and understanding of the world. Planning for each of these developmental domains is organised in four broad developmental phases, each building on the last: 'beginning', 'moving on', 'advancing further', and 'towards Grade R'.

Facilitators of Quality Education

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that access to early learning programmes is, on its own, not sufficient to improve early learning outcomes. Good quality provision is essential if children are to benefit from attending ECE [6]. However, fast expansion of ECE services has often been at the cost of the quality of provision [7]. Programme quality in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) has been shown to predict child outcomes [8-12], which at times have been sustained into the early grades [13]. A rigorous review of ECE and cognitive development in LMICs found a weighted average effect size of ECE interventions of 0.64 with children seen to benefit

more from higher quality interventions [14]. Quality of the classroom learning environment can be broadly divided into:

- **structural quality** variables which include the physical setting, teacher qualifications, group size and ratios, access to learning materials, health and nutrition; and
- **process quality** variables including classroom interactions (i.e., teacher-child and child-child), pedagogical approaches, and following the curriculum [15].

Research from both high and LMICs indicate that process quality, referring to what children actually experience in their programme, has a greater influence on child development than structural variables [16-19]. To achieve optimal quality, programmes should include sensitive, mediated practitioner/child interactions tailored to the needs of individual children. Language and cultural sensitivity are also important aspects to be considered. Warm, supportive and encouraging relationships with caregivers facilitate the development of social and emotional skills as well as confidence associated with successful school transition [20-22]. There is growing evidence that certain aspects of ECD programme delivery such as directed mathematics and literacy content as well as positive teacher-child interactions are more highly associated with scores on school readiness measures [23-24].

A well-trained, motivated, and supported workforce of ECE practitioners with the requisite knowledge and skills is key to quality implementation of learning programmes and impacts child outcomes [25-26]. This relates to their ability to convey the curriculum content through appropriate teaching strategies [27]. Practitioners need to organise their learning programme and apply strategies to facilitate the desired ELDA's outcomes.

In addition, there is growing evidence of how ELP centre-level contextual factors and practices can directly or indirectly enable better process quality for teaching and learning. The association of management and administrative competence with classroom quality has been noted in South African quality studies [28-29] and the literature has identified a number of mediators relating to leadership, sustainability, working conditions and environment, and professional support [30-35].

Home Care Environment

The nature and quality of the early home care environment has a critical impact on child development [36-37]. Parents and primary caregivers are a child's first teachers. Engaged parents and primary caregivers can provide early learning support for children and improve children's learning outcomes. In addition, their role may also become a powerful complement or quality enhancement to ongoing pre-school provision [38]. While ELPs are not in a position to directly influence or intervene with the home care environment, good quality ECE services provide opportunities to engage with parents, support their growth as educational role models, and advise on good health and nutritional practices for their children [39]. ELPs are also well placed to facilitate and link parents to additional services that are of benefit to the child such as social

grants, and health and developmental referrals. Furthermore, ELPs contribute substantially to children's safety and nutrition particularly in low-income communities.

Child Capacity to Support School Readiness

According to the literature, children should have the capacities listed below to benefit from schooling. These internationally recognised capacities are operationalised in South Africa's National Early Learning and Development Standards (NELDS), which underpin the NCF and ELDA [40].

- **Executive functioning** capacities underpin success in school [41]. These include holding information or instructions in mind during classroom activities; focusing on task-relevant stimuli during problem solving tasks; resisting internal or external distractions; and cognitive flexibility.
- **Emergent numeracy** such as counting, number knowledge, estimation, and measurement are the strongest predictors of later overall academic achievement [42-43].
- **Emergent literacy skills** are strong predictors of later literacy achievement and include: a large vocabulary; being capable of explanatory talk; demonstrating some letter identification before age five; understanding narrative and story; understanding writing functions; knowing nursery rhymes; and demonstrating phonological awareness [44-45]. Vocabulary and oral language also strongly predict later reading comprehension [46-48].
- **Social and emotional competence and self-regulation** are important for school readiness and social success [49-51]. These include self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship skills; and responsible decision-making [52]. Prosocial behaviours enable positive peer and teacher relationships (e.g. helping, sharing, taking turns), and self-regulation skills support the inhibitory control of aggression [53-54].

Research Design & Methodology

The ECD Deep Dive study is a mixed methods study that employs qualitative and quantitative research methods to gather insights into ELPs and home-level factors that impact child development. The mixed methods approach allows for a comprehensive picture of the ECD sphere underpinned by a diverse range of perspectives from different stakeholder groups.

Objectives

1. To gain an understanding of the current implementation of the NCF for children birth to four years
2. To understand how play-based learning is being used by ECD practitioners in their classroom implementation, including an assessment of the quality of practitioner-child interactions
3. To gain insight into the capacity of ECD practitioners to engage with parents and make use of referral pathways to auxiliary services
4. To understand internal and external monitoring, quality assurance mechanisms and support received by programmes in delivering quality programming
5. To understand how ELP quality, as measured by various observational tools, are associated with child outcomes

Study Themes

To meet the objectives, the study responded to 17 research questions across five themes (see [Research Questions by Theme](#) in Appendix 2 for a complete list):

1. Implementation of the NCF and other curricula
2. Quality of practitioners and learning environment
3. Parental engagement and access to auxiliary services
4. Professional support and monitoring
5. Outcomes: Centre and Child

Quantitative Study

Sample

The sampling frame for the quantitative study consisted of 185 ELPs in four provinces (Western Cape, Free State, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal) for which ELOM and Programme Quality Assessment (PQA) data from the Thrive by Five datasets existed. The Thrive by Five data with associated audit data, merged with the ECD Census data, was used as the sampling frame. From the 185 ELP sampling frame, 50 ELPs stratified by province, geo-type (urban/rural) and quintile were identified. One ELP had to be replaced during fieldwork as parents did not consent for their children to participate in the study.

The sample of 50 sites needed to be diverse in terms of curriculum implementation and average child ELOM scores, relative to centres with the same socioeconomic status (SES), in the same settlement type (urban/rural) and DSD registration status. We restricted the sample to the Free State, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Limpopo, and the Western Cape provinces, and to centres which use either English or one of the predominant languages in the four provinces (Sesotho, isiZulu, Sepedi and isiXhosa, respectively).

Non-probability sampling was used to identify the 50 ELP sites in a three-step manner, and the final sample was confirmed by DBE and LEGO Foundation:

1. The sample was stratified according to SES (revised categories from the Positive Deviance Project), settlement type (urban/rural) and DSD registration status. We ensured the sample reflected the distribution of ELP centres by SES in South Africa.
2. The sample was then ordered by classroom observation quality score or Learning Programme Quality Assessment (LPQA) per stratum. Twenty-five Centres (and 10 replacements) with the highest LPQA score per stratum were selected, along with 25 average performing centres (and 10 replacements).
3. The average ELOM score per centre was evaluated to ensure that there was also variation in child outcomes. Centres were replaced purposely to ensure variation at both the curriculum implementation and child outcomes levels as well as to ensure that there were sufficient sites per province.

Data Collection Tools

Five data collection instruments were used in the quantitative study. Table 1 provides a description of the data collection tools and corresponding sample sizes.

Table 1. Quantitative Data Collection Instruments

Instruments	Description	Sample Size
Practitioner interview	Two teachers per site were invited to participate in an interview. One teacher/classroom should be for an older age group (age 4 to 5) to coincide with ELOM eligibility of the children in the class. The second teacher/classroom should be for a younger age group (age 3 and/or 4).	n=97
Classroom observation	Classrooms of the interviewed practitioners were selected for observations, using the following tools: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Curriculum checklist using the ELOM Curriculum Subscale from Learning Programme Quality Assessment (LPQA) ● Teacher-learner interactions: The teacher-learner interactions observation takes a step back and observes the day's activities to identify the following: connection to experience, problem-solving skills development, stimulating a child's capacity to explore, child and practitioner agency, practitioner creating a positive climate and practitioner stimulating participation in the classroom. An adapted version of the LEGO Foundation's Playful Learning Across the Years (PLAY) classroom observation was used. ● Learning environment: The classroom learning environment checklist looks at the physical environment of the ELPs and includes items from the PLAY tool as well as items adapted from the ELOM LPQA. 	n=93 n=94 n=93
Child assessment	Direct child assessments using three tools: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Standardised Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) including Height-for-Age (HFA) ● Social-Emotional Functioning (SEF) 	n=190 n=189
Principal/manager/matron interview	One principal/manager/matron per site was invited to participate in an interview. The tool used was an adapted version of the DBE baseline audit done on a sub-sample of the Thrive by Five index sites, bolstered by the qualitative consultants.	n=50
Parent/caregiver interview	Telephonic interviews were conducted with parents/caregivers of the sampled children to assess their Home Learning Environment (HLE) using the DataDrive 2030 tool.	n=136

Fieldwork training

The first training for the eight ELOM assessors took place in Johannesburg from 25-29 July. The training was followed by a three-day pilot, led by a Senior ECD researcher, to test the instruments and fieldwork protocols at three ELP sites in the Western Cape (two peri-urban and one suburban). Findings from the pilot informed revisions of the instruments. Due to the gap between training and fieldwork, a virtual refresher course was provided on 18-19 August 2022. The final training was held on 29 August 2022, which focused on retraining assessors on the revised tools.

Data Collection

Quantitative data collection was conducted between 30 August-22 September 2022. The assessors worked in pairs – one being a qualified ELOM assessor responsible for the child assessments and the other conducting the classroom observations and interviews. At most ELPs, all data was collected in a single day but some ELPs had to be visited on two days.

Assessors used tablets to collect data via SurveyCTO, a mobile data collection platform. All form submissions were directly imported from SurveyCTO into a database hosted on Airtable, a cloud-based relational database solution. In addition, the database stored information about the teams, assessors and ELPs as well as served as an administrative hub to send automated communications, calculate monthly payslips, and do fieldwork planning.

Telephonic interviews with parents/caregivers of the sampled children were an integral part of the data collection process. To ensure the highest quality and professionalism, these interviews were conducted by a team of trained and experienced call centre agents. Contact details were provided by the school principals after obtaining explicit approval from the parents. Before initiating the calls, an SMS was sent by way of introduction and to inform the parents/caregivers about the study. By following these meticulous procedures, the aim was to foster an atmosphere of trust and transparency with the parents/caregivers. In an effort to reach each parent/caregiver, call centre agents worked after hours and weekends. In addition, multiple attempts were made to establish contact.

Fieldwork went smoothly. The biggest challenge was the lack of eligible children at some ELPs, either because there were simply not enough children in the required age group present or because parents did not consent to their children's participation in the study. As a consequence, two or three out of four planned ELOM assessments were not completed at eight of the ELPs.

Data Cleaning and Analysis

Data cleaning of the quantitative dataset was conducted during fieldwork. There was an emphasis on in-form data verification to limit quality concerns. A large part of the data cleaning was automated on Airtable and data cleaning was scripted in the form of Stata do-files so that all

data manipulation steps are reproducible. The preliminary quantitative data analysis was used to identify the seven ELP Deep Dive case study sites. For more information refer to the [Qualitative study methodology section](#).

After data cleaning, descriptive and inferential methods were employed. Descriptive analysis was used to describe the quantitative study sample and respond to all research questions apart from question 16 and question 17, which were answered with inferential analysis. Inferential analysis was employed to explore the relationship between ELOM scores and the PLAY tool scores as well as other instruments. A two-phase approach was used for model building. [Model diagnostics and limitations](#) can be found in Appendix 3:

1. Correlations were explored between ELOM scores and a large range of potential explanatory variables. Spearman's rank tests or Wilcoxon rank-sum tests were used for statistical testing.
2. Logistic regression models with standard errors clustered by ELP were built to explore the associations between ELOM scores, the PLAY tool scores, and the explanatory variables identified in the correlation analysis.

Qualitative Study

Case Study Sample

The qualitative arm of the study consists of a deep dive case study on seven ELPs and insights from national stakeholders. Selection of the seven ELPs was done using the quantitative data collected for this study (i.e. ELOM scores and classroom observations), following a decision by the study's stakeholders to focus on 'positive deviants' (i.e. ELPs that produce significantly better outcomes than comparable ELPs with similar resources). ELPs were ranked as 'low-performing' or 'high-performing' according to their ELOM and classroom observation scores within each province/quintile subgroup. We then purposefully selected pairs of ELPs in Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape and one ELP in Limpopo. Language diversity was also a factor. The table below describes the characteristics of the seven sites.

Table 2. Characteristics of the ELP Case Study Sites

ELP	Province	SES (Monthly Fees)	Enrolment	ELOM TB5	Primary Language	Performance based on ELOM and classroom observations
FS1	Free State	R1751 or more	134	83	English	High
FS2	Free State	R111-290	54	71	Sesotho	High
KZN1	KwaZulu-Natal	R0-110	124	67	isiZulu	High
KZN2	KwaZulu-Natal	R111-290	61	27	isiZulu	Low
WC1	Western Cape	R291-750	53	69	isiXhosa	High
WC2	Western Cape	R291-750	84	34	isiXhosa	Low
L1	Limpopo	R111-290	55	58	Sepedi	High

Case Study Site Descriptions

Five ELPs underwent an in-depth analysis due to their comparatively high ELOM and/or programme implementation scores. These ELPs are located in the following provinces: Free State (FS1 and FS2), KwaZulu-Natal (KZN1), Limpopo (L1), and the Western Cape (WC1). To facilitate comparison, two underperforming ELPs were selected – one from KwaZulu-Natal (KZN2) and another from the Western Cape (WC2). The selected underperforming ELPs shared environmental similarities with their counterparts in each province. The brief profiles below provide key characteristics of each site as context.

[Free State 1 \(FS1\)](#)

FS1 represents an urban, private ELP that employs a Christian-based curriculum. Although not yet registered, the facility enrolls approximately 135 children across six classes with a staff of nine individuals. Adequate child/practitioner ratios are maintained in all classes. The centre has well-established policies, governance structures, and financial controls. Tuition fees are set at R2,170 per month. The ELP boasts a well-equipped environment, including learning materials, child-friendly facilities, first aid provisions, security measures, a library, tuck shop, and spacious outdoor areas. The site stands orderly and serene, featuring impressive architecture and furnishings. Staff members exhibit warm and sensitive interactions with children and maintain

formal yet polite communication among themselves. Notably, FS1 stands out as the sole multi-cultural ELP in the sample, though some concerns related to cultural respect are present. Instruction is limited to English and there was no evidence of indigenous games. Despite favourable ELOM scores and high-quality resources, gaps in implementing NCF principles were observed. This ELP has not undergone any departmental monitoring.

[Free State 2 \(FS2\)](#)

FS2 operates as a registered township ELP, hosting 54 children under the care of four practitioners and a principal. Tuition fees range from R111 to R290 per month. The ELP has brick classrooms for distinct age groups, though the youngest age groups share a space. Infrastructure is sound, with access to water, electricity, and gas, secure fencing, trees, and a vegetable garden. While resources are sufficient for older children, babies and toddlers have limited materials. The facility is well-managed, offering balanced meals and quality early education. Financial management involves the SGB, emphasising parental inclusion. Challenges include funding shortages and security concerns in the community. FS2 actively promotes cultural diversity compared to its peers.

[Kwa-Zulu Natal 1 \(KZN1\)](#)

KZN1 stands as a rural school catering to 124 students, overseen by 11 practitioners and a principal in six classrooms. Its positive reputation draws students from various areas. Fees range from R111 to R290 per month. The registered ELP features play areas, security measures, and essential amenities. While rainwater is used, occasional river fetching is required. Electricity and gas support cooking and lighting. The school's cleanliness, effective layout, and engaged leadership contribute to its excellence. KZN1's designation as a centre of excellence by the provincial education department signifies its high-quality education. Nonetheless, financial constraints challenge staff remuneration and timely funding.

[Kwa-Zulu Natal 2 \(KZN2 Paired with KZN1 for Comparison\)](#)

KZN2, situated in a rural locale, remains unregistered. Operating from an old courthouse, it accommodates 61 children in two classes. Tap and rainwater, along with electricity and gas, serve basic needs. Fees align with R111 to R290 per month. Financial uncertainties lead to high staff turnover. KZN1 and KZN2 share rural, low-income settings with funding challenges. KZN1 benefits from experienced leadership, while KZN2 grapples with less experienced staff and limited training, focusing more on child welfare than play-based education.

[Limpopo 1 \(L1\)](#)

L1, a rural NPO, operates as a fully registered, subsidised ELP with 46 children. The facility boasts mixed-age classes, dedicated staff, and a key organisational family. Infrastructure includes fenced grounds, outdoor spaces, and essential amenities. Challenges involve water shortages and kitchen safety concerns. Fees range from R111 to R290 per month. L1 stands out for its holistic care approach and integration with the local community's cultural practices.

Western Cape 1 (WC 1)

WC1, a registered ELP in a noisy township, accommodates 51 children overseen by three practitioners. The site fosters a cheerful atmosphere, promotes child development, and actively involves parents. Notably, training and safety measures are priorities. The facility remains a safe haven in a violence-prone area, providing exemplary care despite financial limitations.

Western Cape 2 (WC2 Paired with WC1 for Comparison)

WC2, a non-profit registered ELP located in a township, caters to 84 children. Its physical resources include electricity, gas, water, and hygiene facilities. Though the centre faces challenges in outdoor play space and staff training, the well-trained principal's focus on Grade R sets it apart. However, there is a lack of systematic oversight and training focused on other classes.

Stakeholder Sample

Table 3 provides a list of stakeholders who participated in the qualitative study, including the DBE, ECD representative structures, ECD academics, a disability focused ECD NGO and a multilateral organisation. Provincial and local stakeholders were linked to the case study sites, including NGOs providing support and provincial or district education officials.

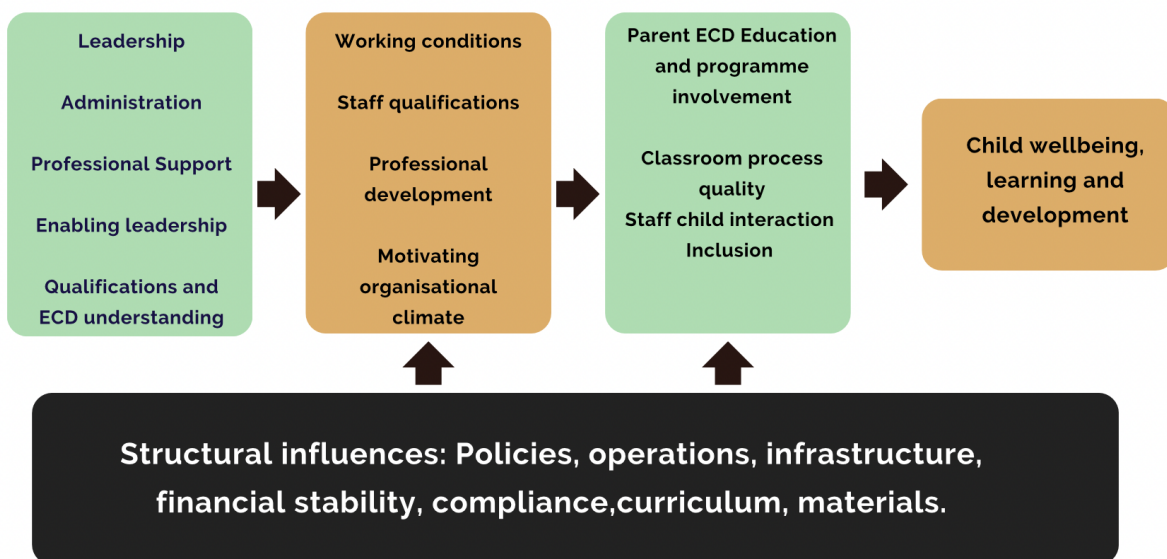
Table 3. Key Informant Interviews	
Data Collection Activity	Sample Size
National Respondents	
National ECD Network	1
National ECD Association	1
Higher Education Representative and SA Research Association for Early Childhood Education (SARAECE) Representative	2
National Parenting NGO	1
National Disability Support Organisation	2
DBE Curriculum Unit	3
DBE Inclusion Directorate	3
Multilateral ECD Technical Support	1
Total sample	14

Case Study Respondents	
Western Cape Education Department (Provincial ECD Respondent)	1
Free State NGO Moqhaka District	1
Free State Education Department (Provincial ECD Respondents)	2
KwaZulu-Natal Education Department (Ugu District official)	1
KwaZulu-Natal Education Department (iLembe District official)	1
KwaZulu-Natal NGO Ugu District	1
KwaZulu-Natal NGO Ilembe District	1
Limpopo NGO Ba-Phalaborwa	1
Total sample	9

Data Collection

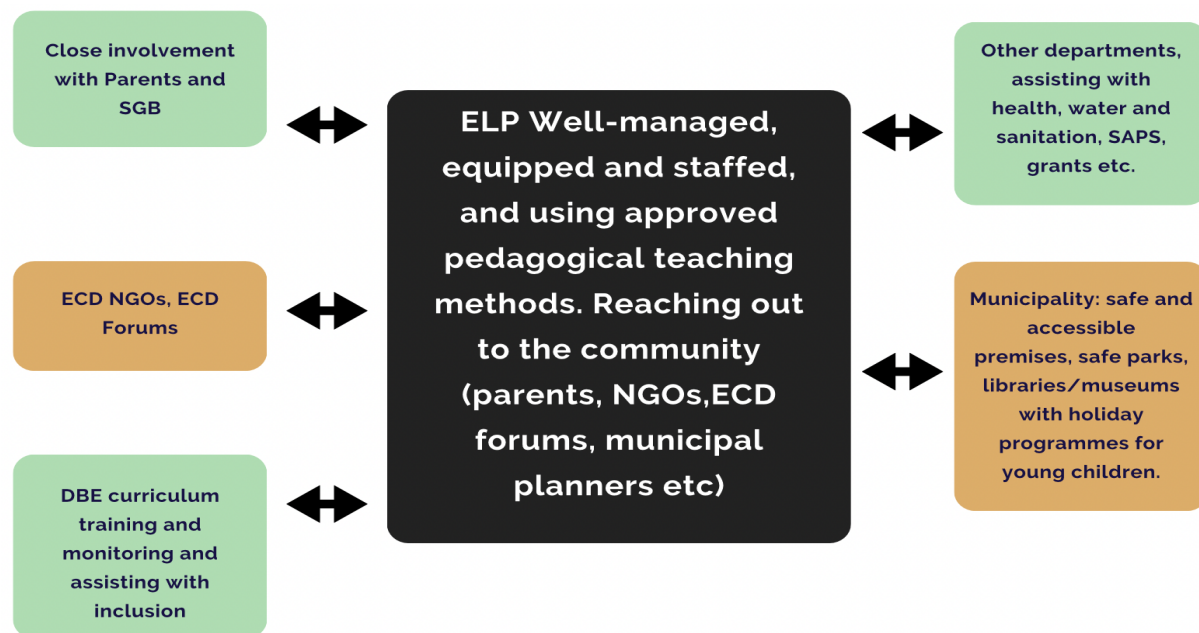
The design of the qualitative data collection instruments was informed by the conceptual framework below as well as a pilot with ELP principals and practitioners. This framework was informed by the [literature review](#) and explores factors that create a resilient ecosystem that enables quality services to improve child outcomes.

Figure 1A: Centre level factors associated with quality education¹



¹ Adapted from: A. L. Douglas (2019) Leadership for quality early childhood education and care: Paris OECD Paper No 211

Figure 1B: An enabling ecosystem to support ECD centres



The qualitative arm of the study was completed in November 2022 towards the end of the school year. Qualitative data collection consisted of four different processes:

- face-to-face interviews with the ELP staff (principal and 1-2 practitioners from different classes (depending on number of classes) at each site;
- in-person or virtual interviews with local NGOs and provincial/district education authorities supporting that site;
- site observations of teacher-child interactions, facilities and resources; and
- focus group discussions (FGDs) - one with parents and one with members of the SGB.

The ECD consultants developed a field manual containing guidelines for timetabling and procedural issues, informed consent, recording, observations, semi-structured interview schedules, and the topics for discussion in FGDs. The ECD consultants conducted an online training for the three researchers responsible for data collection. They were familiar with the vernacular for their allocated sites and had extensive ECD knowledge and experience. The consultants provided on-going support during data collection to clarify questions and resolve issues.

Researchers made appointments with the ELPs in advance and spent three days on site for extensive data collection. Signed consent was obtained from principals and practitioners. They requested support from the principals to recruit FGD participants and the FGDs were held on site. A contact list of provincial education departments was supplied by the National DBE. NGOs supporting case study sites were identified by the ELPs.

In parallel, the ECD consultants contacted national stakeholders via phone or email and invited them to participate in Zoom interviews either individually or in groups of 2-3 from the same organisation. Respondents underwent the informed consent process, and their agreement to participate was recorded verbally. The interviews were typically around one hour in duration.

Data Analysis

All interviews and FGD recordings were transcribed and translated into English where necessary. Themes 1-4 were used as the basic coding structures and the research question under the theme was coded as sub-themes. Theme 5 was treated as a summary and extension of the relevant findings from the other four Themes.

The initial coding was completed by research assistants and quality control in the form of cross-checking and restructuring was carried out by the ECD consultants. The consultants then summarised the findings in an iterative process of distilling meaning from the many sources of information and sometimes conflicting opinions. Key patterns, relationships and insight quotations were identified and merged with quantitative results to draw out the main findings.

Study Limitations

Sample Size

The sample of 50 ELPs from which the case studies were drawn provided adequate information for the selection of qualitative case study sites, but did not have sufficient statistical power to test meaningfully for group differences. Similarly, while a high average ELOM score based on only three or four randomly drawn child scores in each centre is an indicator of a good outcome for the programme, it may not be representative of the class and it does not preclude the fact that there may have been other more worthy cases for in-depth study. Furthermore, children between the age of three and four may not be representative of the class. All but one site served predominantly single ethnic groups, meaning the issues for management and teaching in more ethnically diverse ELPs were not fully explored.

Inter-Observer Reliability

Achieving good inter-observer reliability on the LEGO Foundation PLAY tool proved difficult after three different training sessions, so the analysis based on the PLAY tool should be interpreted with caution. The limited reliability of the PLAY tool restricted the ability to make strong inferences about the relationship between ELOM scores and the six themes covered by the tool.

Bias

There were some discrepancies between principals' reported practices at the administrative level and the actual implementation and comments by practitioners within and between studies, which posed a challenge for data harmonisation. This may suggest social desirability bias whereby principals or practitioners presented their ELPs more favourably when surveyed, or limitations in their understanding of the requirements of NCF implementation. In addition, despite in-depth training, there is a risk of observer bias due to the complex, nuanced observational tools and inherent subjectivity stemming from unique perspectives of fieldworkers. Lastly, due to the extensive number of data collection activities, there was an increased risk of fieldworker and response fatigue that may have influenced quality of the data.

Telephonic Interviews

While there was a high success rate for telephonic interviews, we recognised the challenges associated with uncertainty from caregivers over the phone. These uncertainties encompass caregivers who may not be readily inclined to respond to inquiries over the phone, particularly when it concerns matters related to their children. To address this issue, our experienced call agents diligently reassured caregivers during the interviews. However, achieving this high success rate came with the cost of after-hours and weekend work by call agents to effectively reach caregivers for interviews.

Logistic Regression Analysis

For more information on limitations, please refer to Appendix 3 [Logistic Regression Analysis](#).

Results

The Results section is structured into three sub-sections:

1. Themes 1-5 presenting key findings per research question
2. Logistic regression analysis investigating factors associated with child- and centre-level outcomes is presented
3. Showcase of seven ELP deep dive case studies

Throughout the results section, key findings are highlighted in bold font and consolidated at the end of each section with a key findings box.

Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and other Curricula

The first theme of the study focuses on implementation of curricula and delves into four research questions related to: the type of curricula implemented at ELPs (Question 1); the incorporation of play-based learning to promote child agency (Question 2); the barriers or enablers influencing curriculum implementation (Question 3); and the inclusion of children with disabilities (Question 4).

Question 1

To what extent is the NCF, or similar curriculum for early learning, implemented in the ECD programmes on a daily basis?

About the NCF Curriculum

The NCF for Children Birth to Four Years covers six developmental domains or ELDAS which include:

- **well-being:** gross and fine motor development, understanding health, nutrition and safety;
- **identity and belonging:** sense of self, positive relationships with others and recognition of diversity;
- **communication:** language and other forms of expression;
- **exploring mathematics:** numeracy, shape, space, measurement, comparing, sorting and grouping;
- **creativity:** experimenting and problem solving through play, make believe, drawing, painting, cutting and pasting, modelling and music, rhythm, dance and drama; and
- **knowledge and understanding of the world:** information about the world usually presented in themes and learning about technology.

Planning for each of these developmental domains is organised in four broad developmental phases, each building on the last: 'beginning', 'moving on', 'advancing further', and 'towards Grade R'. A good learning programme accommodates the needs of children in each phase as well as different levels of development within each phase. Daily, weekly, quarterly and annual lesson/activity plans ensure that all ELDA are covered in the children's activities. Activities which integrate several ELDA help to achieve that goal. The NCF promotes the use of play-based learning as the appropriate way for young children to learn, rather than the more formal teaching methods typical of primary schools.

Inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream ECD centres, early identification of disabilities, and referrals for treatment, with appropriate support, is considered important so that all children obtain care and education, as that is their right.

Planning Activities

Nearly all practitioners in the quantitative study (91%) report using some kind of lesson plan to guide their main activities, which is corroborated by the qualitative case study findings. Among the high-performing case study sites, three engage in regular joint planning, one allows practitioners to plan individually, and one did not specify its planning approach. Conversely, both low-performing sites could not articulate a systematic planning process. Below is a quote from FS2 Principal, a high-performing site, underscoring that:

The Department of Education (DoE) came with a lesson plan [template with activities] and we saw it was easy and simplified the work of a teacher. Everything that you should do is inside the lesson plan – there are activities that children should do unlike before where you had to think of those activities... The curriculum has helped us a lot, because some of the things we were able to do, but not in depth. That we felt a child should not go further, so the curriculum breaks the boundaries that we had set for ourselves on behalf of the children.

Implementation of NCF

The quantitative data reveal a substantial majority of practitioners (84%) have access to a copy of the NCF, indicating **widespread availability**. However, evidence from the qualitative interviews showed that the **availability did not necessarily translate into a good understanding of implementation**. Similarly, most (86%) of the principals claim they are implementing the NCF, although some appear to follow **more than one curriculum, which are usually provided by NGOs** (38%). Many NGO curricula are aligned with the NCF, as this is a requirement for ECD Programme Registration with DBE.

Yet, it is important to note that quantitative data found variation in the extent to which NCF is being used, particularly across age groups. Approximately one third (34%) use multiple resources when planning lessons for children aged 0-4 years and 20% use more than one resource for children 5 years and older. For children aged 0-4 years, the primary resource for

activity planning is the NCF utilised by 69% of practitioners, but 77% of ELPs also use other resources in addition to NCF.

There is a significant reduction in the use of NCF resources and a shift towards other curricula for older children. More than half (58%) of ELPs are using the NCF for children aged 0-4 years, which may be explained by observation notes from case study sites highlighting that baby and toddler classes are often less-resourced with limited learning activities offered. Significantly fewer ELPs (27%) are using the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) curriculum. Additional tools used for Grade R include toolkit Pizza Box (29%), Practitioner Guide (29%), NGO (29%), and others (8%). These findings emphasise the initiative that practitioners take to **utilise a diverse range of resources** beyond NCF as a way to ensure effective and comprehensive lesson plans for different age groups.

There are also variations in NCF knowledge and application across ELP case study sites. Among the five high-performing case study sites, WC1, FS2, and KZN1 closely collaborate with NGOs that help align their curricula with the NCF, resulting in notable examples of successful NCF application. L1 (high-performer), has knowledge of the NCF but did not reference it when describing their programme. FS1 (high-performer) is using a US Christian-based curriculum, and when asked about NCF, the principal responded, saying:

We still provide for those needs in spite of not implementing the NCF. We've been doing this a very long time and all the years we've been providing for those needs [ELDAS] without having a paper to tell us what to do.

Principals at both low-performing sites report using the NCF, but their comments show poor understanding of it. For example, WC2 described using a formalised pre-academic instruction approach and KZN2's practitioner offered an inadequate understanding of the NCF saying:

We use NCF to plan our daily activities. Yes, I understand it because it helps children. [For example], it touches a lot on animals and sets [grouping as maths activities]. The first week we discuss transport and the second week we go out and play.

In contrast to feedback from ELPs, national respondents typically comment that the NCF is not universally known or implemented, as indicated in the quotations below:

Most ECD centres are implementing [a daily programme, but most of them are not yet at a point where they can articulate that this is the NCF]. (National DBE)

Practitioners don't quite understand how to make the NCF come alive as part of their daily routine. (National ECD Network)

Practitioners don't have sufficient depth to implement the NCF. Implementation is mechanical. (Multilateral)

Quality of Implementation

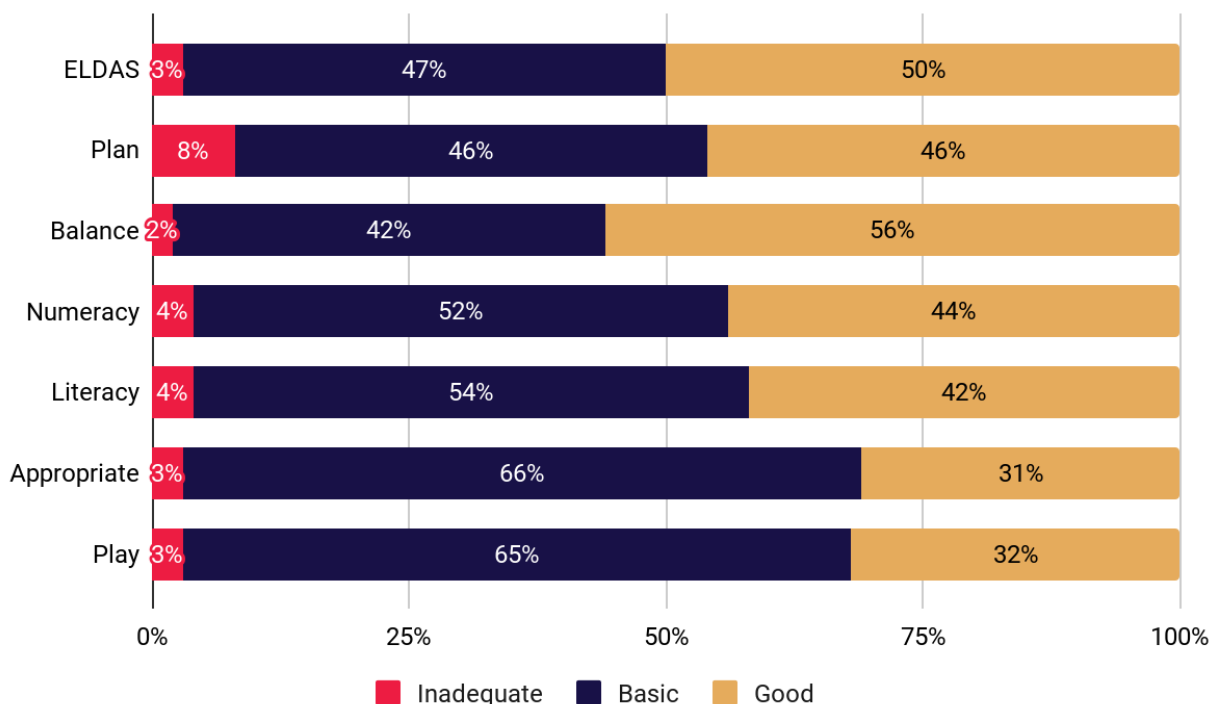
To mitigate bias associated with self-reported data and enhance reliability, the curriculum subscale of the ELOM LPQA [39] was administered, an observational rating to assess the extent to which ELPs in the quantitative sample incorporate the seven dimensions associated with the NCF. The seven dimensions are outlined below and the scoring rubric for 'inadequate', 'basic', and 'good' per dimension can be found in [Appendix 4](#):

- **Curriculum:** Learning programme is guided by the ELDA's and aim and phase specific developmental guidelines
- **Plan:** Practitioner organises activities according to an integrated weekly and daily plan
- **Balance:** Programme/daily schedule includes a balance of free play, small groups and whole groups
- **Numeracy:** Programme includes numeracy and mathematics activities
- **Literacy:** Programme includes language and literacy activities
- **Appropriate:** Practitioner delivers the learning programme in an accurate and developmentally appropriate way
- **Play:** Practitioner adopts a play-based approach which includes free play (indoors), actively engaging in children's own play to enhance their learning, designing activities where children can explore and experiment as well as incorporating enjoyable group activities that are fun and encourage participation.

Overall, despite some of the contradictory findings above where national ECD stakeholders report poor implementation and ELPs report NCF adherence, these findings show that ELPs perform moderately well across these indicators of quality. However, this does not mean they are adhering to the NCF. Nearly all ELPs who did not receive 'good' ratings display 'basic' performance, and only a very small minority are 'inadequately' covering the dimensions.

The case studies and self-reported data from practitioners demonstrate a diverse range of curricula that cover most dimensions. Figure 2 illustrates the results of classroom observations across the seven domains, which align with the findings from the self-reported data. With regards to 'good' ratings, 50% of ELPs received a 'good' curriculum rating and 47% scored as 'basic' rating. Less than half demonstrate 'good' proficiency in planning (46%), numeracy (44%) and literacy (42%). However, only one-third received 'good' ratings for appropriateness (31%) and play (32%). Very few ELPs are performing 'inadequately', but of those, planning was identified as the main issue (8% of ELPs) and should be addressed with those ELPs despite their claims that they do in fact plan.

Figure 2: Curriculum implementation at ELPs by dimension



In alignment with the above, all case studies indicate that they aim to provide a holistic learning programme. However, during in-depth interviews, not all of the ELPs explicitly reference ELDAs. Most national respondents perceive ELP programming as rigid and generic, lacking integration across different ELDAs as well as an individualised, inclusive approach, which invariably has a negative impact on child outcomes. Across all case study sites, there is a notable emphasis on social and emotional development, and several sites incorporate teachings on prayer, respect, and listening. Rote learning of the alphabet, counting, colours and months of the year was also seen in some high-performing sites. However, despite positive feedback from the ELPs, national respondents perceive a lack of emphasis on mathematics, creativity, cognition, and executive functioning in comparison to other ELDAs.

Individualisation and Inclusivity

High performing case study sites consider the importance of individualism and diversity to some degree, despite perceptions and concerns highlighted by national respondents. This is demonstrated in the prioritising of observation and free play opportunities in three high-performing sites (FS2, WC1, KZN1), which allow for responding to individual needs and learning styles. In all but one high performing site, there are provisions for cultural diversity through inclusion of local and indigenous content. These sites utilise the local languages of instruction, and three of the five go a step further by accommodating children who speak other languages.

However, one high-performing site (FS1) has a diverse enrolment and does not include indigenous content, only using English as the language of learning and teaching (LOLT).

Self-reported quantitative data aligns with the qualitative data around language inclusivity. Half (50%) of principals have a formal language policy in place. One-third of ELPs (32%) utilise two languages and the majority (60%) are able to respond to children in their chosen language. **This inclusive approach results in children being able to speak their home language in the majority of ELPs (64%).** All principals indicate that they **provide individual support for children who struggle with the teaching language.** However, observations conducted on teacher-learner interactions reveal a different picture; **only 31% of interactions utilised multiple languages for explanation purposes.** This raises potential concerns as to the reliability of self-reported feedback and suggests language barriers may actually be more prevalent in reality.

Key Findings NCF Implementation

- **Planning Activities:** Nearly all practitioners use some kind of lesson plan to guide their programmes, which is often augmented by resources from NGOs.
- **Implementation of NCF:** Most ELPs report having access to and implementing the NCF, contrary to National ECD stakeholders reporting that the NCF is not universally known or implemented. This may be due to a lack of understanding of all the requirements of the NCF by teaching staff. For example, the low performing case study sites show an inadequate understanding of the curriculum. Additionally, most of the ELPs seem to be supplementing the NCF with other curricula.
- **Quality of Implementation:** ECD stakeholders perceive implementation of the curriculum to be rigid and generic, lacking a focus on ELDA and room for an individualised, inclusive approach. However, observations show that ELPs are indeed performing moderately well in incorporating the seven principles of the NCF that constitute good 'quality' curriculums. High performing sites, in particular, emphasise social and emotional development.
- **Individualism and Inclusivity:** ELPs appear to understand the importance of individualism and diversity despite perceptions and concerns from stakeholders. ELPs report being language inclusive through use of multiple languages but observations show that this is less common.

Question 2

The ECD Census and Thrive by Five data suggest that the attitudes of practitioners and principals towards child agency in learning and play tend to value practitioner agency over child agency. How do practitioners view children's agency in their own learning and how does this affect their implementation of the curriculum?

Lack of Knowledge of Play-Based Learning

National key respondents raise concerns that **ELPs lack an understanding of play-based learning and child agency.** This leads to a predominantly formal role of practitioners in the classroom

that limits free choice for children. For example, the DBE indicates that **play-based learning is not seen as important by ELPs.** A DBE representative underscores this saying “*Practitioners see play as something extra, an addition to learning and that there must be a way of training for them to see that it is aligned.*” This is corroborated by the National ECD Association informant who believes, “*When practitioners do give them free choice, they are at a distance instead of getting involved.*” The National Disability Support Organisation holds the belief that:

It all boils down to the teacher having a lack of understanding on the importance of play. And therefore, that basis is not there, there won't be child agency, they won't be learning through play. There's a lot of time and energy spent on getting children to conform to what the adult wants.

Varied Implementation of Play-Based Learning

National respondents highlight **limited free choice opportunities** for children often linked to **limited resources.** Consequently, practitioners often **resort to traditional instructional approaches.** The National ECD Association shares that “*There are so many variant interpretations of learning through play and especially those skills to allow the child to take the stage and the adult gets involved by invitation and limited skills in allowing children to take the lead.*”

In contrast, case study findings reveal that **all five high performing sites actively implement play-based learning, demonstrating their commitment to enhancing children's learning experiences and cultivating an environment that encourages agency.** However, **variations exist among the sites in their understanding and application of agency within play,** as indicated by the feedback from practitioners and principals within the high-performing ELPs:

There are learning areas that need play for the lesson to be understood. Other learning areas need us to focus or learn by making examples of them. I instruct them to do certain tasks, secondly I give them the leading questions, thirdly is child-led play. Most importantly they should enjoy [their learning experience].” (FS1 Practitioner)

When you allow a child to make their own decisions, you give them the opportunity [to solve their own problems] if they are struggling. You just guide and let the child find the correct [way]. (FS2 Practitioner)

Children learn better if they play and experience things for themselves rather than being formally taught. (KZN1 Principal)

We don't choose for the child, they should play in whatever area they want. (L1 Principal)

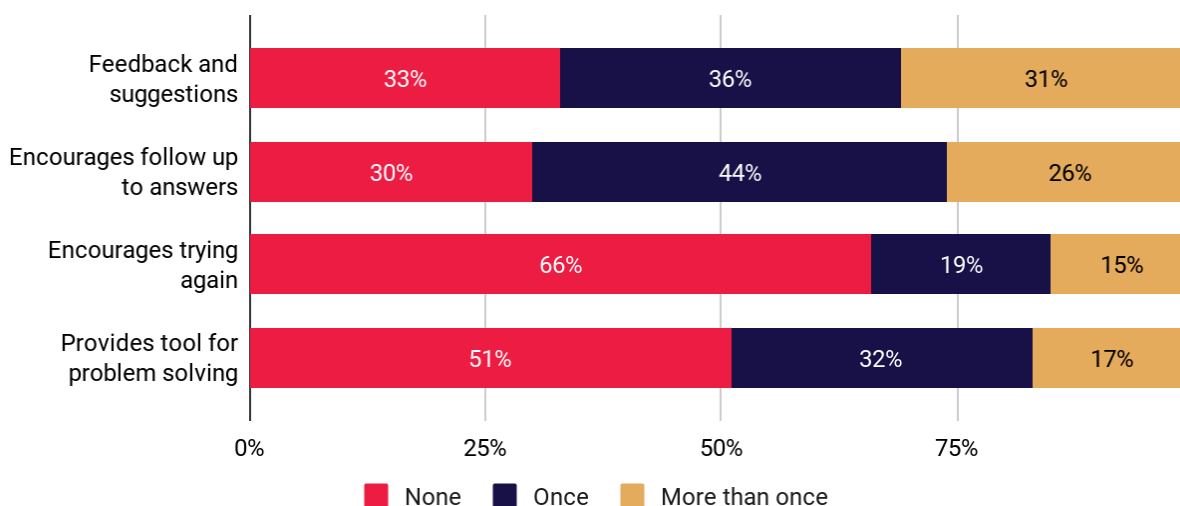
The two low-performing sites, however, exhibit a lack of agency and choice provided to children. In the case of WC2, it is evident that practitioners predominantly dictate the activities, leaving minimal room for children's agency: “*I have to choose for them what they should learn. I have to teach them that when they arrive in grade R, they don't choose what to do by themselves, as topics*

are chosen by the teacher.” Additionally, the principal of WC2 expressed the NCF does not prioritise or facilitate learning through play, highlighting a significant gap in the educational approach at this particular site stating “Our creche slogan says learning through play... but not so much, because when it comes to [the NCF programme] that is planned for us, they tell us what the child should be doing and such.”

Measurement of Child Agency

The adapted version of the PLAY tool observes whether practitioners facilitate and encourage child agency within a 20-minute observed timeframe. This includes providing feedback and suggestions, encouraging answers, encouraging trying again, and whether practitioners provide tools for problem solving. Findings demonstrate **that practitioners predominantly encourage child agency through feedback and suggestions (67%) and encouraging follow-up to answers (70%) (Figure 3)**. These results align with case study sites, which aim to enhance children’s learning experiences and foster an environment that promotes agency. However, it is noteworthy that only half of the practitioners (49%) equip children with the necessary tools to effectively solve problems, and an even smaller proportion (34%) encourage children to attempt something again if they have initially struggled or been unable to solve it.

Figure 3: Practitioner Encouragement of Child Agency



Structure and Boundaries

All case study sites speak about the importance of instilling structure and boundaries amidst play-based learning. They emphasise fostering a culture of respect, teaching the importance of following rules, active listening, and imparting moral values through direct interactions and explicit communication. For instance, high-performing sites FS2 and L1 recognise that **while granting children autonomy, it is equally important to guide and set limits to ensure a safe and**

structured learning environment. L1 principal says, “You tell the children that we are here to learn and respect each other. To the ECD practitioners, early in January, I say teach the children the rules and teach them about God.” FS2 Principal says, “Even when a teacher is not talking, the class [set up] should speak to the child. You can allow children to make their own decisions but there should be boundaries, you teach them how to play in a good way.”

Key Findings Play-based Learning and Child Agency

- **Lack of knowledge:** Stakeholders believe practitioners lack knowledge around play-based learning and child agency that limits children's free choice and hinders development.
- **Varied Implementation:** High performing sites create a conducive environment for play-based learning and cultivating child agency, whilst low performing sites focus more on teacher-directed activities.
- **Promotion of Child Agency:** Practitioners predominantly encourage child agency through feedback and suggestions, and encouraging follow up to answers. They less frequently provide tools for problem solving or words of encouragement to try again.
- **Structure and Boundaries:** Although child play and agency are important, case study sites believe it is also necessary to maintain a level of structure and boundaries for children.

Question 3 What are the barriers or enablers to the implementation of the NCF in ELPs?

Regarding implementation of the NCF, national key respondents and ELPs identify substantial barriers hindering effective implementation, including **class and classroom size, age range, comprehension issues, limited training and support, parent expectations and access to resources.** Additional barriers include practitioner training, capacity, confidence, and working conditions, which are explored in [Theme 2](#). The below findings highlight the **need for improved clarity, accessibility, and practicality of the NCF to better support practitioners in their planning and programmes.**

Barriers to implementation

Classrooms: Availability, Size and Age Composition

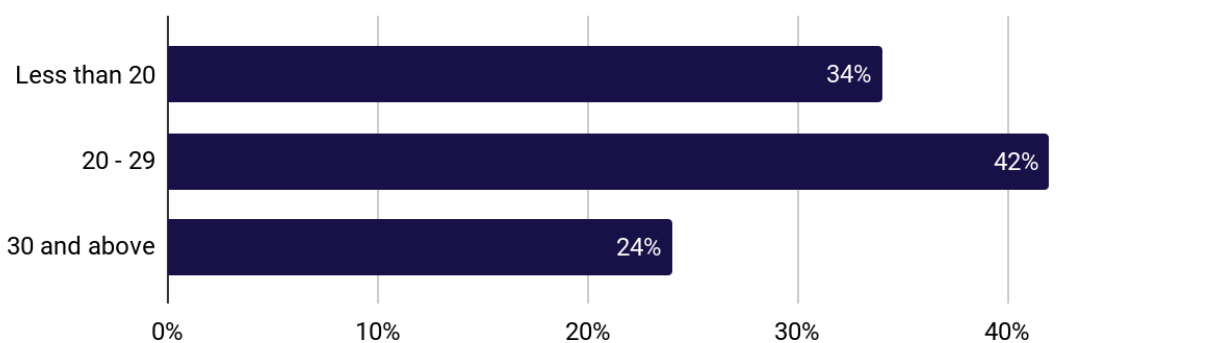
Challenges with classroom availability, size and age composition are common. A National ECD Network expresses that “*Lower quintile [ELPs] have many kids and it makes sense for them to have many kids from a business point of view but just being able to manage all of those [high] numbers... (makes it difficult to implement effectively)* “. Issues around large classroom size are corroborated by quantitative data, where 42% of classrooms have between 20-29 children, 24% have more than 30, and 34% have less than 20 children, (Figure 4). At two high-performing sites (FS2, L1), a shortage of classrooms has led to the youngest two age groups sharing space and overcrowding.

Regrettably, this arrangement disadvantages the toddler group, as they lack appropriate resources and activities, essentially becoming onlookers to the more engaging programme designed for the older group. According to KZN DoE some sites are able to keep age groups separate, which enhances NCF implementation:

And another thing that makes this ELP stands out is the separation of age groups. Not mixing the age groups helps in implementing the NCF. Each age cohort has a [dedicated] practitioner who follows the NCF as indicated in the document.

Another related barrier includes **children arriving late**, which is disruptive and impacts on quality implementation.

Figure 4: Class size



NCF Complexity and Standardisation

National respondents believe the **NCF is difficult to implement because the principles are too broad, and practitioners require more structured guidance on how to implement it**. However, templates to **standardised implementation can detract from the goal of increased child and practitioner agency** because many staff lack the confidence to divert from planned activities. South African ELPs vary greatly in terms of their social, cultural, and economic contexts, but it is important that the NCF is viewed more as a collection of guidelines than as a prescriptive manual. This point was made by national experts who argue for a simple introduction to NCF principles. The National Parenting Organisation pointed out, *“The way that is put forward in the NCF is very complex for that person who observes. Maybe we should start with simpler tools as opposed to expecting the principals to have this integrated understanding of how to read all the elements of the NCF.”* A multilateral stakeholder said that *“Practitioners [tend to] focus on the NCF principles that are easier to understand and implement, and have resources available.”* Other national respondents point out that the **fear of making an error results in practitioners adhering rigidly to the programme, thus limiting their ability to respond adaptively to the needs of individual children**.

Case study sites echo the above concerns. The Principal at WC2, a low-performing site, believes *“...I don’t think the practitioners understand the NCF... There are times when I find them not doing the actual thing they should be doing. And [they] say ‘No Ma’am, these things are difficult for*

children.” Another principal from a high-performing site (KZN1) uses the provincial education department planning templates but finds them ‘scanty’ and adds to them.

NCF Training

Most respondents viewed training as important and helpful to them, but it was difficult to grasp in its entirety or to understand how to use the planning templates. Sometimes it was not easy to obtain the documents or supporting learning materials were not available.

Practitioners discuss lack of training on the NCF templates: *“The templates guide on who to conduct the lessons and activities and help in explaining further, they really do... but to be honest being trained and qualified on the ECD levels is most important”* (L1, high-performing site). **Lack of access to resources** is also highlighted: *“They sent [the NCF manual] to us by file on my phone for us to print out but there’s nowhere to print out, so you see it’s a problem”* (L1, high-performer) and *“When a teacher is in need of equipment he will not be able to work well* (FS2, high-performer).”

Expectations from Parents

The views of parents on the service provided by the ELPs is discussed in detail in Theme 3 below, but it is important to note, in the discussion on the NCF, that not all parents were in agreement with the language policies and the content of the learning programme.

Some case study sites speak about **requests from parents that deviate from the NCF and pose challenges with implementation**. These include, for example, requests for lessons to be in English and to focus on formal learning (e.g. early writing, counting, and reciting the alphabet) rather than play-based learning. Another challenge highlighted by the National Parenting NGO is that *“In terms of things like play-based pedagogy, they [the parents] don’t want that”*, which conflicts with NCF guidelines.

Enabling Factors for Implementation of NCF

Enabling factors reported by ELPs and also observed by fieldworkers include **receiving support (often from an NGO), utilising templates to guide NCF planning, maintaining reasonable class sizes organised by age and phase, and having access to training**. Having **sufficient staff, educational materials, and a comprehensive understanding of the NCF**, were identified as further enablers. Case study staff comment:

The templates guide on how to conduct the lessons and activities and help in explaining further they really do (FS2 Practitioner, High-performer).

Inside the lesson plan there are activities that children should do unlike before when we did it by programme organiser (theme)...where you had to think of those activities... We still think of them just that it’s easier now...these lesson plan[s] also encourage creativity (FS2 Principal, High-Performer).

She has not mixed the age groups which helps when you implement NCF, because each age cohort has a practitioner who focuses on the age cohort and also follows the NCF, as it is indicated in the document (KZN1, Provincial education official, High-performer).

The principal said that they had enough educational toys so that the practitioners were always able to select toys to support the activities she had planned for the children (WC1, High-performer)

(To enable curriculum implementation) planning for a lesson helps (FS1 Practitioner, High Performer)

The important thing for a teacher is to go for training so that he can teach children (KZN1 Practitioner, High Performer).

Because the principal has no class you do what you do in your class, but she tells you that if there's anything you do not understand, when you do not know maybe it's that daily programme or a lesson, you cannot give the activities to the children, or how to present to the children you must come to her then she does the job and you observe and do the lesson by yourself (WC1 Practitioner, High Performer).

Key Findings

Barriers or Enablers to NCF Implementation

Barriers to implementation

- Lack of classroom availability, large class sizes, different age groups in the same classrooms and children arriving late
- NCF too broad, complex and standardised
- Lack of access to NCF templates
- Lack of access to resources and equipment such as printers
- Parental expectations that sometimes conflict with NCF principles

Enabling factors that support implementation

- Sufficient staff and appropriate classroom sizes composed by age and phase
- User-friendly template guidelines
- Improved access to learning equipment
- Receiving support from NGOs and experienced colleagues
- Access to training and educational materials
- Good communication and relations with parents enable alignment of learning goals and increase understanding of how children learn.

Access to ELPs

The most recent available data shows very low enrolment in ELPs of children with disabilities² (0.003% of the total), but there were differences in survey respondents' and national key informants' opinions about this.

According to the quantitative data, there is sufficient inclusion of children with disabilities. Only a minimal proportion (6%) of ELPs report that they do not enrol children with disabilities when they apply, whilst a substantial proportion have enrolled children with disabilities in the past (60%) or currently (53%). An insight from the qualitative case study suggests that training and support influences ELPs' willingness to enrol learners with disabilities. A Principal from FS2, a high-performing site, shares *"The reason we take them is because Ntataise sent people from an organisation to assist us."*

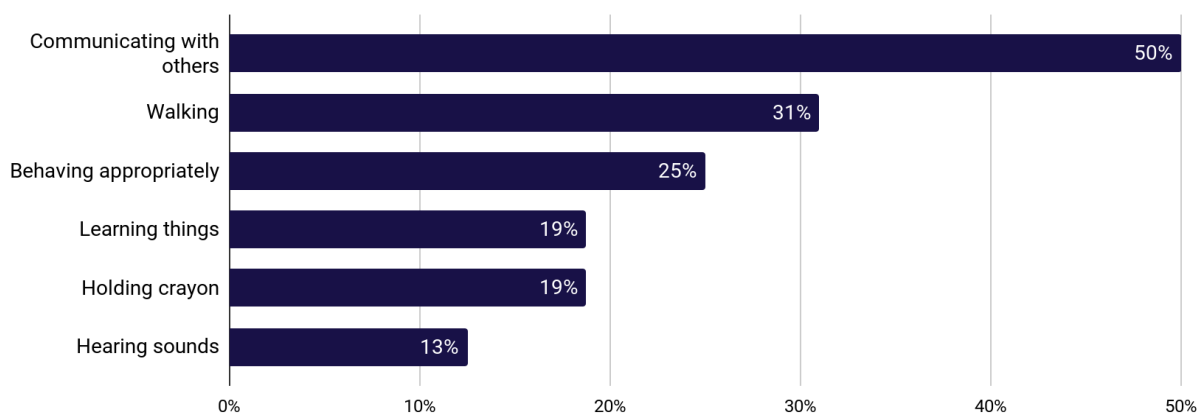
Conversely, national respondents believe there is limited access for children with disabilities, which is further compounded by apprehensions about admitting them. A Higher Education respondent shares that *"Given all of the other kinds of challenges that they [ELPs] experience...they are reluctant to accept children with barriers to learning, simply because of the special accommodation and because they haven't been trained in that particular area."* The National Disability Organisation comments *"It's perceived that it's a lot more work. And because it's a lot more work, people (ELPs) don't go there (enrol children with disabilities)."*

Types of Disabilities

Figure 5 describes the diverse range and most prevalent types of disabilities seen at ELPs. **Communication challenges are the most prevalent (50%), followed by difficulties in walking (31%) and behavioural challenges (25%).** Although comprehension (learning things), fine motor skills (holding crayon) and hearing are less prevalent, they are still an issue.

² National Planning Commission (2020) The Status of Disability in South Africa. Pretoria. Reporting on 2016/17 DSD data.

Figure 5: Types of child disabilities



Identification and Referral

National respondents believe that ELPs have limited capacity to identify children with disabilities as well as inadequate programming that does not cater to their needs:

People may say that they are inclusive in approach, but there are a lot of disabilities that go undetected. Usually, people just think about a physical disability... there's a lot of children whose limited cognitive capacity is not maximised due to lack of early identification - There is lack of knowledge around other types of disabilities. (National ECD Association)

However, in contrast some case study sites express their confidence in identifying disabilities and making referrals. Three high-performing sites (WC1, FS1, KZN1), two of which serve poor communities and have modest resources, report successful identification of specific disabilities and developmental delays in their programmes. These ELPs actively make referrals for further assessment and intervention, ensuring that parents receive the necessary support. The principal from KZN1 stresses the crucial role ELPs play in identifying disabilities: *"We are the first to identify that the child cannot see or hear well, but we don't tell the parent directly because we are not specialists."*

Provisions for Children with Disabilities

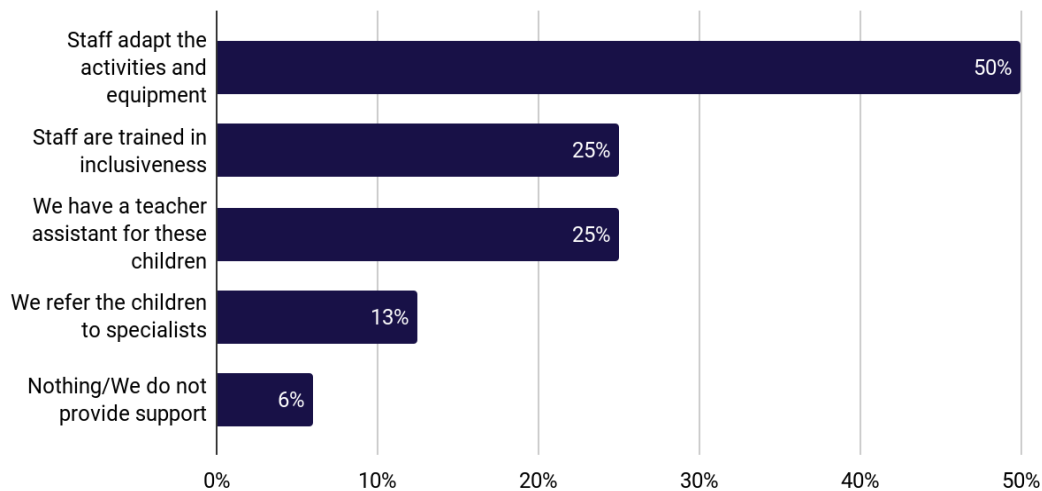
Quantitative data in Figure 6 sheds light on the **limitations of providing for children with disabilities.** The most common approach amongst 50% of ELPs is to adapt activities and equipment. Only 25% of practitioners are trained in inclusiveness or have a teacher assistant for children. Lastly, 6% do nothing. One low-performing site (KZN2) and two high-performing sites (WC1, KZN1) describe **adapting activities and strategies to support children:**

We placed him [a Down Syndrome child] according to developmental age not chronological age. The teacher really helped this child. Now he can talk, something he couldn't do. (KZN1)

The problem is in his hands, he cannot hold the pen and other stuff and even here in the class he's disturbing. If we do finger painting, I give him a sponge that he can use. (WC1)

Although referral is critical, only 13% refer children to specialists, which then makes sense that most principals (86%) feel there is a need for trained specialists to make referrals. Furthermore, 72% express the need for more training in inclusive practices, 68% identify the need for specialised equipment, and 38% request additional staff.

Figure 6: How do programmes provide for children with difficulties



Support for ELPs

Case study sites and national respondents emphasise the need for **improved and continuous support, including human resources, training and materials, to improve ELPs' capacity** to effectively cater to the needs of children with disabilities:

We do not have knowledge regarding disabled children, we wish that the department can help us at the centre, like at schools, to send people even to us that have knowledge of disabled children. They should send those people to come and identify those children as well as confronting the parents of children. (FS2, high-performer)

We would like more training and equipment to help the children. (KZN2, low-performer)

So, by and large, the whole space of special needs and broad social inclusion is a problem, and the systems are not in place and the training is not there and so forth. So, it's a ripe area for development in so many different ways, including the systemic place, which is most important. (Higher Education Informant)

Recommendations from national respondents for addressing these gaps include the DBE providing inclusion units and cross-functional teams to support the ELPs as well as a mass support programme by occupational and speech therapists suggested by National Disability Organisation.³

Key Findings Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

- **Access to ELPs:** ECD stakeholders express concerns around access and inclusion of children with disabilities; however, some ELPs report inclusive practices.
- **Types of Disabilities:** Communication, walking and behavioural challenges are the most common types of disabilities recognised at ELPs.
- **Identification and Referral:** ECD stakeholders perceive ELPs to have limited capacity to identify and cater for children with disabilities, although high-performing sites report feeling confident in this regard.
- **Provisions for Children with Disabilities:** Case studies and quantitative data point to limited training opportunities, provisions for children with disabilities and referral pathways, which accords with the views of national ECD stakeholders about the need for training and an improved referral system.
- **Support for ELPs:** There is a substantial need for additional support, training and materials on dealing with children with disabilities. Greater involvement of DBE Inclusion Teams was recommended by stakeholders and requested by case study sites.

Theme 2: Quality of Practitioners and Learning Environment

The second theme focuses on practitioners' capacities including their knowledge, skills and confidence and how they facilitate or hinder implementation.

Question 5

What are the capacities (knowledge, skills, confidence) of ECD practitioners/educators that facilitate or hinder the implementation of quality early learning programming?

Current Qualifications

The quantitative data indicate that **nearly half of principals and practitioners have matric (46% and 45% respectively), and similarly, little more than half (54% principals and practitioners) have NQF level 4 ECD qualifications.** As shown in Figure 7, more practitioners than principals have not

³ An example is the Blocks for Growth support initiative of the Western Cape Government which targets children identified as being far behind in ECD centres for an intervention by speech and occupational therapists to work with the children, their practitioners and parents.

completed matric (37% vs 26% respectively). Certificates and diplomas are less common, especially amongst practitioners. Regarding ECD-specific qualifications, an NQF level 4 certificate is the most common (45% of practitioners and 46% of principals), and **principals tend to have higher ECD NQF qualifications overall** (Figure 8).

In this context, it is interesting to note that the FS1 principal (high-performing site) has only one Grade R educator with a University of South Africa (UNISA) certificate and places greater importance on experience rather than education, stating *“DBE wants me to look at the practitioners' qualifications which I don't really agree with. I feel someone with more experience than the qualification can do the job better.”*

Figure 7: Qualifications

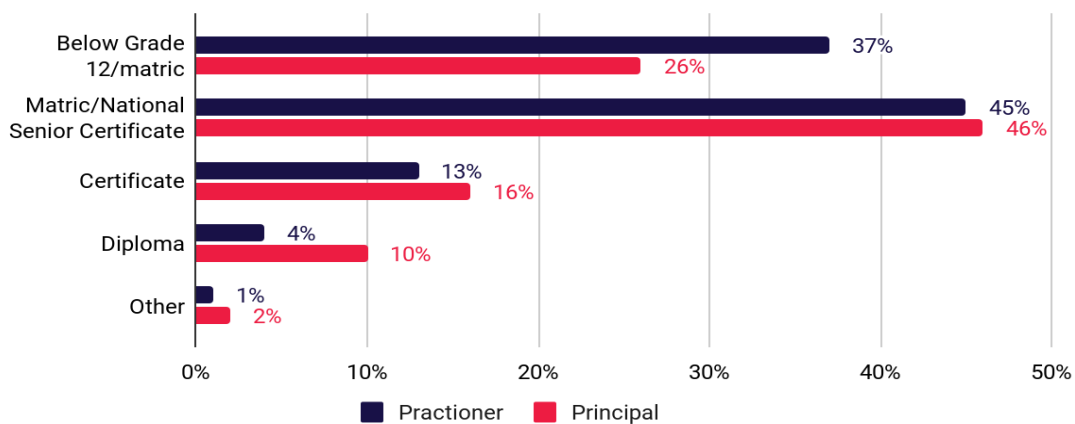
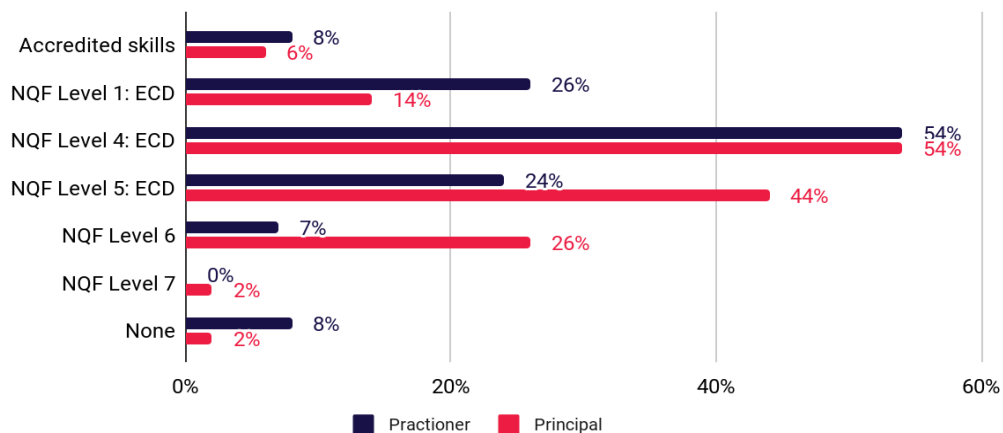


Figure 8: ECD Specific Qualifications



Need for Professional Development

Given the low levels of formal education and qualifications, **national respondents raise concerns and emphasise the need for increased professional development within the sector.** A multilateral stakeholder indicated that:

If we say somebody with a level 4 or even 5 qualification is able to implement the NCF or any early learning and development curriculum, based on the NCF principles and will produce proper child outcomes, we are fooling ourselves. Until there's professionalisation of ECD, there'll continue to be poor quality and implementation.

A National ECD Association respondent emphasised the **significant impact of training on confidence levels**, expanding that:

A practitioner who is confident about her knowledge and skills, is able to display good practice, and is not easily swayed or dictated to. A confident practitioner can actually be a change agent. She won't face the same pressure from parents who expect activities that are not age appropriate.

In addition to qualification levels, **there is a severe gap in terms of formal NCF training that indicates a need for improved training.** While some exposure to the NCF through NQF training is noted (Figure 8), it is important to highlight that high-performing KZN1 is the only case study site where all staff members are trained on the NCF. In other sites, staff members attended provincial DBE workshops and some appeared to lack familiarity or had a superficial understanding of the NCF. For example, a practitioner at L1 (high-performer) commented on a briefing by education department staff: *"They spoke about NCF but for only 30 minutes I'm too confused about some things they spoke of, maybe it was the first time I came across them."*

Professional Development Recommendations

The value of improving teacher knowledge and capacity is widely emphasised including by the SBG at WC1 (high-performing case study site): *"By improving the teachers' [education], that takes the centre's standard to another level. We can support the available trainings for our teachers to go."*

The DBE acknowledges the need to **enhance training methodologies to better align with the needs of participants in order to facilitate a better understanding of play-based learning:** *"There is a need to improve the training methodology to suit the needs of participants so that they can understand play-based learning... (and not) see play as something extra."*

Several national respondents promote **making the training less theoretical and more practical**, ensuring that practitioners can apply their knowledge and skills in their daily practices.

Additional suggestions from national respondents include strengthening **classroom-level support and coaching** rather than relying on brief three-day training sessions for large groups

facilitated by provincial education department staff. Others highlight the power of establishing **Learning Circles or Communities of Practice**, where communities of practitioners can learn from and support one another, fostering a collaborative and continuous learning environment.

Factors Supporting Staff Motivation

Insights from the case studies highlight that staff motivation, driven by intrinsic motivation and a supportive work environment, is deeply intertwined with the delivery of good teaching practices.

Intrinsic motivation, the internal drive that fuels passion and commitment, emerges as a powerful force in the pursuit of excellence in teaching. Practitioners who are intrinsically motivated find profound satisfaction in imparting knowledge, nurturing students' growth, and witnessing their progress. This innate enthusiasm and dedication translates into dynamic and engaging classrooms, fostering a genuine love for learning among children. This was expressed as passion for the job and love of an interest in young children by the practitioners during the qualitative interviews.

Across all but one case study site, **love and a genuine interest in young children** are the primary sources of motivation for practitioners. The principal from WC1 (high-performer) believes that *"teachers must be drawn to children...Personality is important as well as passion"*.

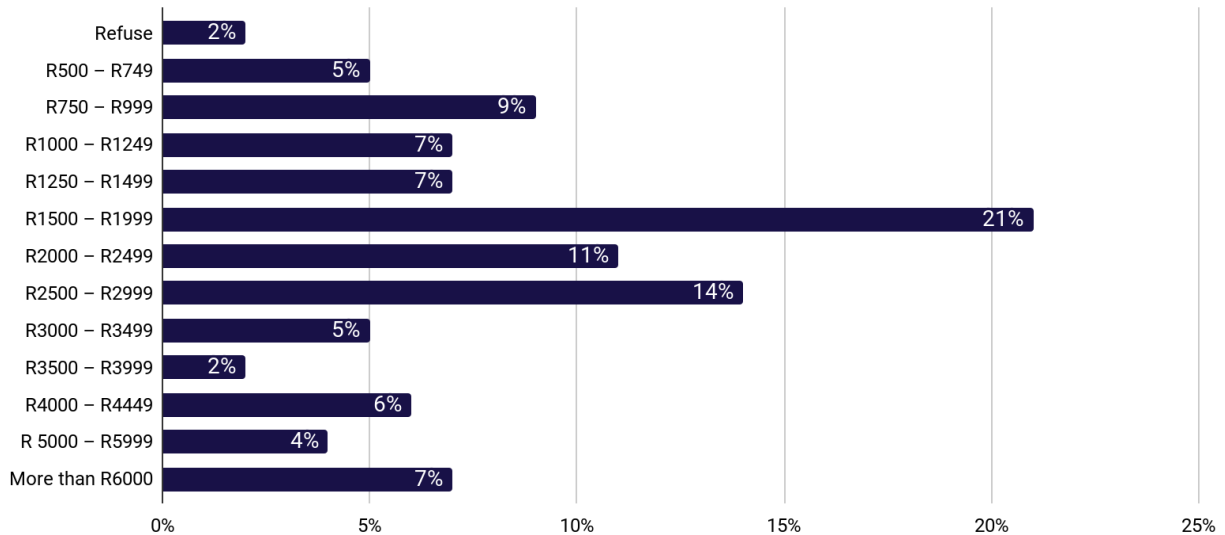
Further, a positive, supportive, collaborative work environment is essential. At the start of the day, staff members at several ELPs come together to pray, setting a **positive and supportive tone for the day**. Additionally, the majority of sites emphasise the importance of **teamwork and collaboration**, as valued by a principal from L1 (high-performing site): *"We support each other as staff, I never do anything alone, I always consult with the team."* This sentiment is echoed by a practitioner from the high-performing site FS2: *"What has made me stay is that we work in harmony... where we find someone has committed a foul we guide them. When we see that one of us is losing momentum, we motivate them."* **Supportive SGBs** are another motivating factor; in KZN 1, FS2 and L1, SGBs provide hands-on monitoring and encouragement to staff, and work to oversee and secure necessary resources for the centres.

Stressors in the Work Environment

There are also **significant stressors in the work environment** that impact quality implementation. The issue of **poor salaries emerges as a significant source of stress** in six out of the seven case studies. In some cases, salaries are **not paid on time or what was received varied when parents could not afford to pay the fees**, leading to financial uncertainty. The FS2 principal (high-performer) highlights the importance of fair compensation: *"When a teacher works hard but is not satisfied with their salary, their work does not become excellent."* A practitioner from KZN1 further emphasises: *"To be honest, there is no salary here, I stay because of the love for this job."* The

findings presented in Figure 9 from the quantitative study corroborate the harsh realities of low salaries whereby approximately half of practitioners earn less than R2000 per month.

Figure 9: Monthly salaries of ELP practitioners



Fatigue and exhaustion due to long hours without sufficient breaks are also common concerns among practitioners in the qualitative study. They often have to wait until the end of the year to take a break, leading to accumulated tiredness and burn out. A practitioner at FS2 (high-performer) explains *"We don't get much downtime because we work with children all year. Within a year, you will find that we experience fatigue. You will find that you are inefficient with children due to fatigue."* Similarly, a member of the parent advisory body at FS1 (high-performer) shares, *"the staff cite fatigue, they work under strenuous conditions, some experience difficulties waking up in the morning to go to work."* This is corroborated by the quantitative findings whereby 76% of practitioners are working 40 or more hours per week (Figure 10). Furthermore, Figure 11 highlights that 34% of practitioners are absent for at least 1 to 2 days per month, which may be as a result of work stress.

Figure 10: Weekly working hours of ELP practitioners

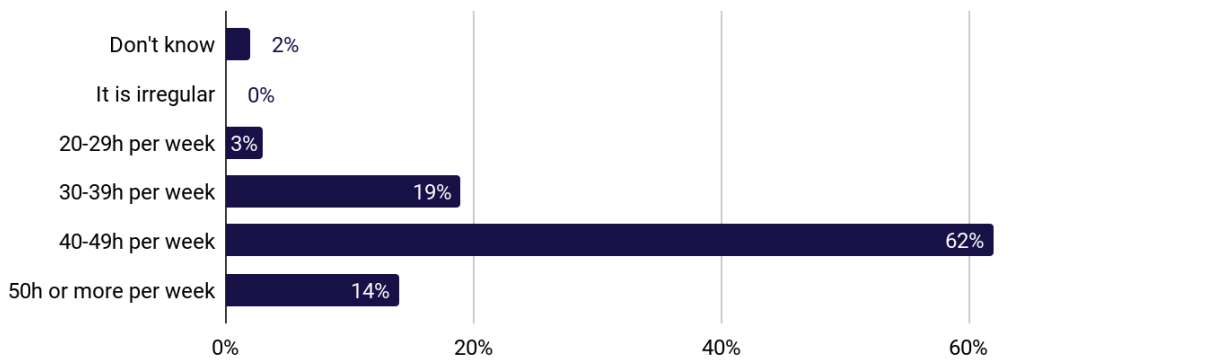
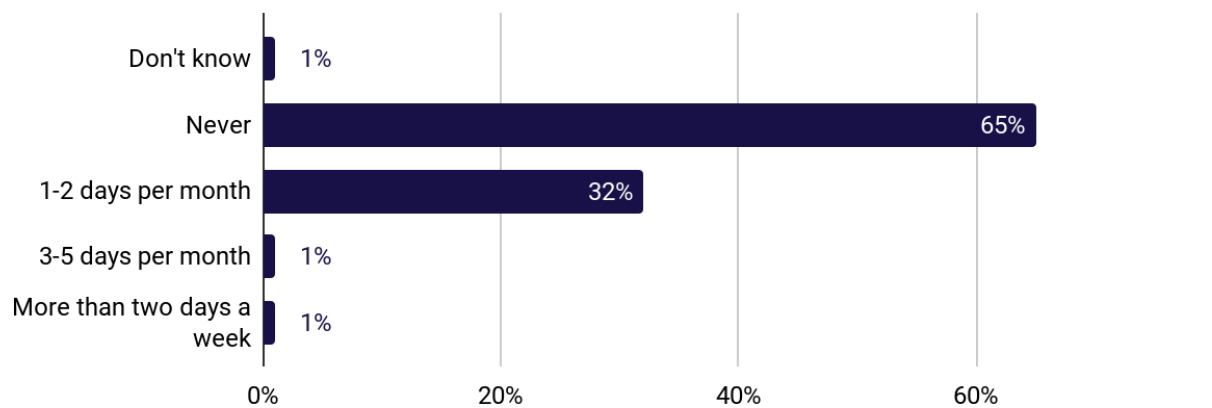


Figure 11: Practitioner Absence



Additionally, **crime and theft** is a worrying issue at some sites. For example, the principal at high-performing site FS2 reports:

We are losing, we even moved the kitchen from where it was supposed to be to the container... hoping that the container is safe but they still manage to break in... they can get in and steal all the groceries for children. When you arrive in the morning you will not find any grocery and it is a problem so we need security in our centres, that is a big challenge that we have.

In addition, a support NGO for low-performer, WC2, highlights the alarming situation where ELPs in the area are being threatened by gangs for protection money.

Key Findings Capacity of ELP Practitioners

- **Current Qualifications:** Nearly half of practitioners and principals have matric-level education yet approximately one-third only have Grade 12. Approximately half hold NQF level 4 certification. Principals tend to have higher levels of general and NQF education.
- **Need for Professional Development:** Stakeholders emphasise the need for increased professional development in the sector, including NCF training for all teaching staff. It is believed that this will increase confidence levels and lead to a better understanding how to implement the NCF as intended.
- **Professional Development Recommendations:** Enhance training methodologies by aligning with the needs of participants and making them more practical; strengthening in-field support and coaching; and establishing Communities of Practice to foster collaboration and continuous learning.
- **Factors Supporting Staff Motivation:** Intrinsic motivation, passion and a supportive work environment, is deeply intertwined with the success of good teaching practices.
- **Stressors in the Work Environment:** Poor or unpredictable salaries; fatigue and exhaustion due to long working hours; and crime/theft.

Theme 3: Parental Engagement and Access to Auxiliary Services

Parent/caregiver support for early development and learning is vital to help children realise their developmental potential. This theme explores the relationship and engagement between ELPs and parents (Question 6); how parents are supported by ELPs to nurture their children's development (Question 7); and the existing referral pathways for auxiliary services (Question 8).

Question 6

What is the relationship between the ECD programmes and the families of children who participate in the programme? Do programmes actively engage with families around learning and development of their children?

Types of Communication Channels

According to quantitative data from principals, **there is a broad range of communication channels used to connect with parents** including: phone calls (68%), parent meetings (64%), message books (64%), social media (56%), and SMS (54%). Notably, a substantial proportion of ELPs (78%) provide regular progress reports to parents, with 92% of these reports being detailed written reports. With regards to frequency of contact with parents, one-third of ELPs engage weekly, 16% communicate monthly, and **the most common frequency of communication is quarterly (54%)**.

In case study sites, **all high-performing centres provide both oral and written reports** on the children's progress, particularly for parents who have regular interactions with the ELPs. However, **it remains unclear whether forms of communication such as notes in children's bags, WhatsApp,**

and SMS are also used to convey this type of information, except for FS1, a high-performing site, which sends a monthly academic plan.

Challenges with Parent-ELP relationships

National respondents highlight various communication challenges between parents and ELPs. Differences in ideas about how children learn and what they should be taught often arise between parents and practitioners. Parents from various case study sites share a common expectation that their children should acquire essential English language skills, such as writing, counting, and reciting the alphabet. This expectation is particularly emphasised when their children will be attending an English medium primary school.

In addition, national stakeholders feel that **practitioners are not always approachable**. On the other hand, **parents sometimes exhibit apathy or feel that their role is limited** to paying for the service without needing to be actively involved. A national ECD network respondent reported *“Many practitioners felt that parents don’t care, they don’t pay regularly or fetch children on time while parents don’t know what the practitioners were doing with the children”*. A higher education sector stakeholder shares the perspective held by many parents:

Often what we find is that parents want the centre to be well run and the children to be taken care of. And then once I drop the child at the gate, it’s not my concern anymore. You’re the teacher, and you must teach the child. So, I’m not needing to engage in the early learning, because that’s your job and that’s what I pay you for.

ELPs also express **challenges with parent-ELP engagement, particularly with young parents who do not respond to invitations from staff to visit the ELP and discuss their child’s development**. Further, **at low-performing sites, there is minimal effort to involve parents in meetings**, and some staff members do not perceive parent participation as important. The practitioner from a low-performing site, WC2, holds the belief that *“[Parent involvement] is not important because we are here as teachers. I don’t think there is a need for parents. They can be there when we register and when there is a graduation.”* An interesting viewpoint from a multilateral respondent raises the connection between negative perceptions of parents and their impact on learning in the home environment:

Some practitioners hold the subconscious belief, especially with poor parents, that you’re not good enough for the early learning and development of your children. Your children will learn when they’re with me, at the centre. Too many subtle messages that say, early learning and development does not happen in the home, it happens in the ECD centre.

Not surprisingly, most principals (78%) report that parents have work commitments which prevent them from being involved at the ELP. In addition, substantial proportions of principals also say that parents are not involved because they “do not care” (46%), are ‘elderly’ and therefore not able to be as active (38%), lack money (34%) or are ill (26%) (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Parents involvement and ECD need for more involvement

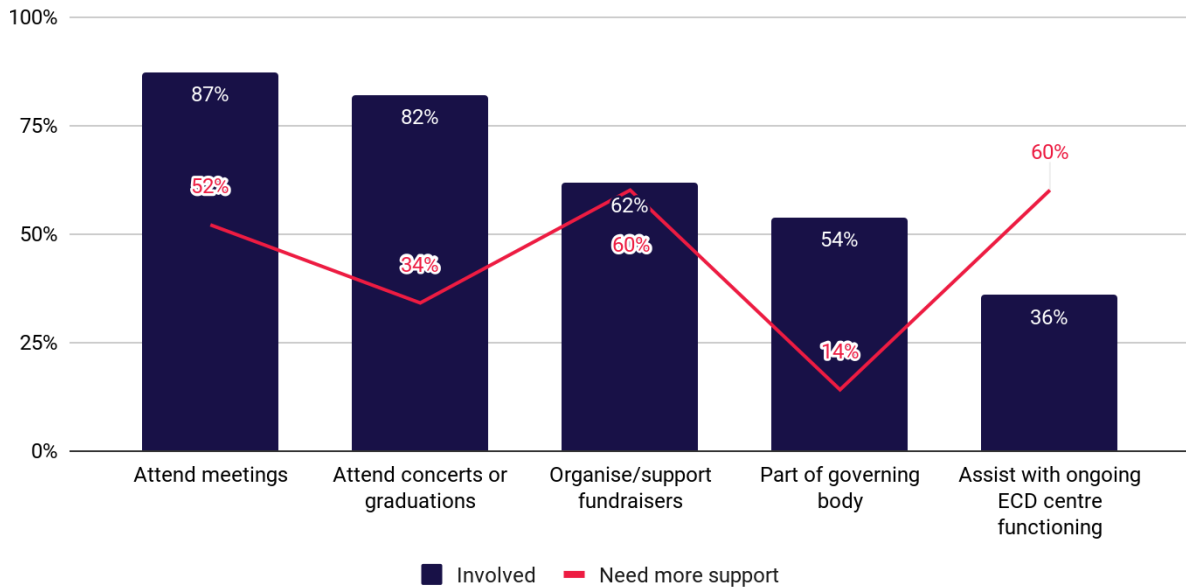
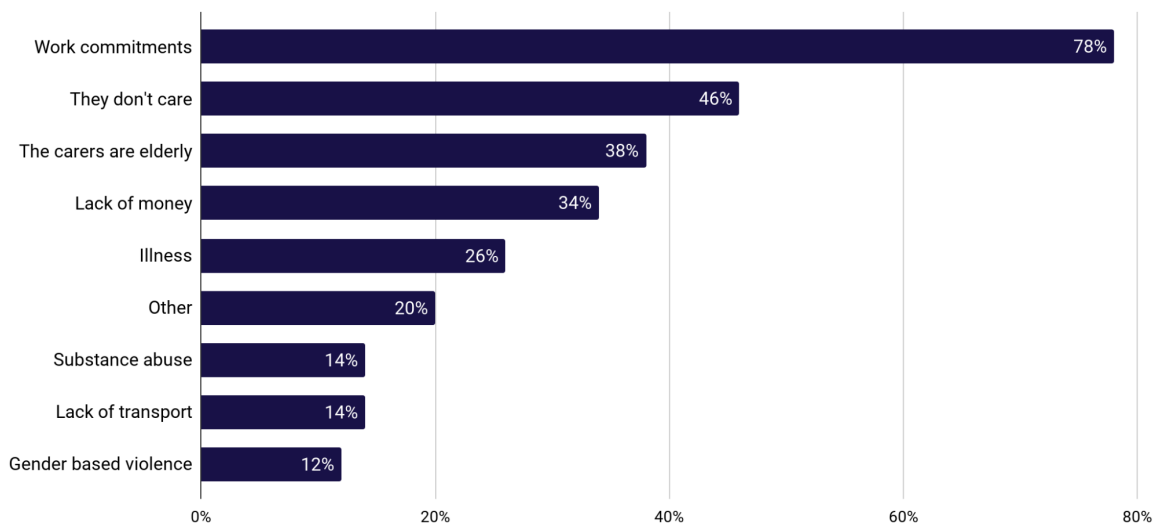


Figure 13: Lack of parent involvement



Positive Parent-ELP Relationships

According to ELP principals in the quantitative study, **parents are more engaged than not, which is positive, but the level of engagement could still be improved.** Almost half (42%) of principals report that most parents actively engage, 6% indicate three-quarters are involved and 30% indicate half. Even so, some schools (12%) experience less than one-quarter of parents involved

and 10% reported no parental involvement. These findings are supported by the case study sites indicating a diverse range of support provided by the parents.

Figure 12 presents the ELP principals reports of parents' involvement and support in specific activities, with the red line indicating the need for more support. **According to principals, there appears to be medium to high levels of involvement and support, but further support is still required.** The most commonly attended and supported activities include attending meetings (87%), attending concerts (82%), organising fundraising efforts (62%) and being involved in the governing body (54%). Even the lowest proportion of ELPs (36%) experience support with ELP operations. Across the board, principals express a desire for more support, especially with the everyday functions of ELPs (60%) where there are currently the lowest levels of support.

High-performing case study ELPs affirm the above findings and recognise the significance of establishing a strong relationship and connection with parents, acknowledging them as vital stakeholders. Almost all high-performing sites have established **multiple communication channels** with parents and report **fostering warm and open partnerships with parents** as well as inviting them to participate in various activities.

Three high-performing ELPs adopt an **open-door policy, allowing parents to visit and observe the programme during open days or at any time.** A principal from the high-performing site, KZN1, also considers that **the centre belongs to the parents**, urging them to be actively involved. She states, *"There is a close relationship and connection with parents; they are important to us. I tell them this centre is not mine but theirs, and they should be its eyes and ears."* The National ECD Network representative also shares the belief *"Parents should be helped to understand that just because they're in a particular socio-economic category, doesn't mean that they can't make that contribution for their children."*

When the parent-staff relationship is positive, staff members are able to effectively explain their play-based approach to parents. Further, parents are also supported to deal with behavioural issues in the home as indicated by the parent of high performing site KZN1:

If there is something you don't want, you should tell him [the child] clearly, and explain to him the reason for not doing something. I was hitting a lot until they [the teachers] explained to me that the children are very sensitive, and you must sit down with him and tell him what to do. They understand, and they are wise.

Parents at these ELPs appreciate the staff's approach toward them and their children, as well as the noticeable progress their children make. Due to their positive experiences, **parents recommend the ELP to other parents**, leading to increased enrolment.

Key Findings Parent-ELP Relationships

- **Types of Communication Channels:** There are a broad range of communication channels used by ELPs to reach parents, with phone calls, parent meetings and reports being the most common. ELPs provide regular progress reports most frequently on a quarterly basis. High-performing case study sites demonstrate stronger communication and more focus on parent involvement.
- **Challenges with parent-ELP relationships:** National respondents raise various communication challenges between parents and ELPs including differences in expectations related to the curriculum and learning through play, approachability of staff, lack of involvement of parents and parent apathy. According to principals, a lack of parental involvement is due to work commitments, parents “not caring”, older age groups unable to be as active, financial challenges and illness.
- **Positive parent-ELP relationships:** There is a common understanding that parent engagement is vital and many ELPs make concerted efforts to involve them in a variety of activities and functions. There are medium to high levels of parental involvement in the form of attending meetings, extracurriculars and fundraising. However, more engagement and support is still required, especially for everyday functioning of ELPs.

Question 7

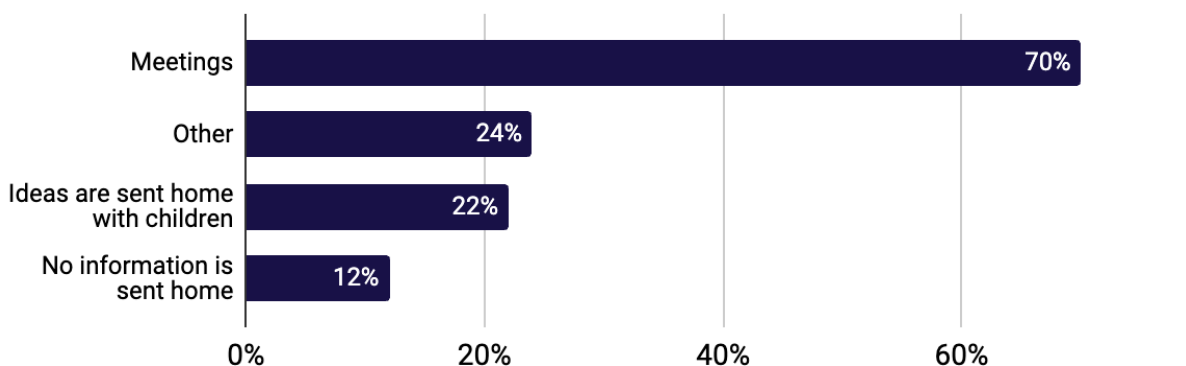
How are parents supported to assist their children’s early learning and development, particularly through play-based learning?

In addition to keeping in contact with parents and soliciting their help with running of the ELP which strengthens relationships, parents need to be introduced to the learning programme and to be supported to support their children’s learning at home. The challenge that many parents expect a more formal learning approach rather than play-based learning was discussed as an implementation barrier in Theme 1 above.

Mechanisms for Supporting Parents

Figure 14 offers insights into what kind of support principals offer to parents according to the quantitative study. Findings reveal 70% of principals **provide information through meetings**. Other forms of support include **sending ideas for activities to do at home with children to facilitate their learning and development (22%)** and **‘other’ mechanisms (24%)** such as workshops or open days, provision of books and toys, assistance with primary school applications, and visual displays (pictures). A parent from FS2, a high-performing site, expresses the importance of receiving information about the daily programme so that they know how to support and stimulate their child at home as well *“If you ask, they can explain what they will be doing next but if you don’t ask, they do what they need to, so I think it’s important they should give us a daily programme of what they do so we can stimulate them when they home too”*

Figure 14: Supporting learning and development at home



Support Programmes

The national respondents highlight some positive examples of ELPs implementing parent support initiatives, referring to two large-scale programmes the **National Parenting Programme**[55]⁴, and the **Caregiver Learning Through Play programme**⁵. The DBE respondents report that provincial departments offer parental capacity programmes in the North West, Western Cape, and Free State provinces. Additionally, for children with special needs, the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy allows parents to contribute to their child's Individual Support Plan.

Need for Increased Support

National respondents report that meetings organised by ELPs tend to be about operational issues such as fees or what food children should bring rather than about early learning. A DBE respondent comments: “Mostly when [the ELP] engages with parents, it would be complaints or when a child has a learning problem”. The National ECD Organisation explains there is **limited engagement around child reports**:

There's very little engagement around child reports in helping parents understand what school readiness means for example. Few ECD centres actually consult with parents around what it is that they would want to see form part of the day-to-day curriculum.

While diverse support mechanisms for informing parents about the programme identified in the quantitative survey, these are not necessarily widely practised. Some parents at both high

⁴ The programme has been running since 2008, offered by provincial DSD staff and NGOs. A partnership of DSD, UNICEF and NECDA from 2017 - 2019 reached 17000 parents.

⁵ The initiative directly targets a significant number of caregivers and ECD practitioners. Since 2021 it has reached 141,000 caregivers and nearly 3600 ECD practitioners. This programme not only focuses on enhancing the caregiver's knowledge of play-based learning but also provides psychosocial support to assist them in becoming responsive parents.

and low performing case study sites express a desire for more information about their children's activities. For example, a parent at high performing FS2 says *"If you ask, [the practitioners] can explain what they will be doing next but if you don't they do what they need to, so I think it's important that they give us the daily programme so we can stimulate them when they come home too."* In this instance, parents receive the information when asked, but at WC2, a low-performing site, parents report that there is no provision for this, explaining *"We haven't been called to come to school, like come and see how the child is doing at school...Each parent would like to see what her child is doing."*

Key Findings Supporting Parents with Child Learning

- **Mechanisms for supporting parents:** The most common mechanism is through meetings but a range of methods such as sending home ideas, workshops, open days, and visual displays are highlighted.
- **Support Programmes:** National respondents acknowledge the benefits of widespread parent support programmes that can offer diverse resources, workshops, and training opportunities for parents. Some ELPs demonstrate positive examples of implementing parent support initiatives, but national respondents indicate that the large-scale national parenting programmes are not widely used.
- **Need for Increased Support:** National respondents highlight the importance of not just focusing on operational issues but also prioritising discussions around child development. Despite diverse support mechanisms highlighted by case study sites, parents expressed a desire for more information.

Question 8

What are the existing referral pathways for primary healthcare, child protection, child welfare grants, birth registration, etc?

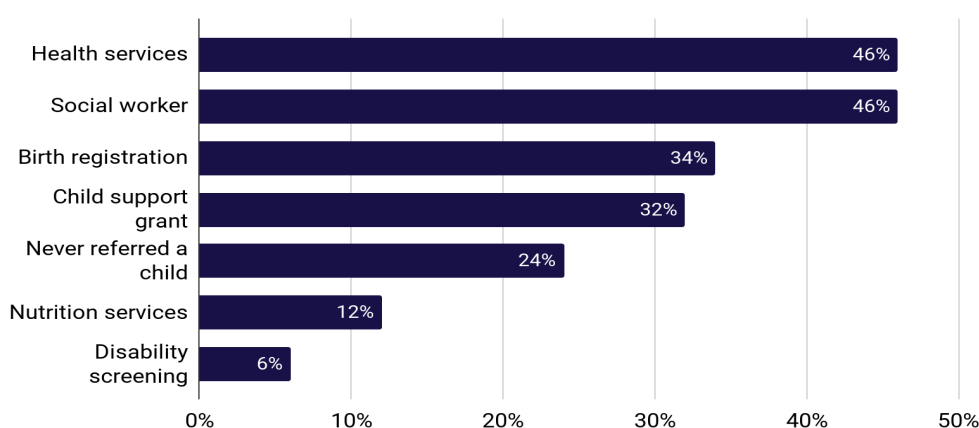
Capacity of ELPs to Refer

National respondents highlight the **need for ELPs to improve their efforts in making referrals and emphasise the importance of sensitising ELPs to the fact that they are a valuable resource for families.** The DBE expresses concern about the effectiveness of reporting child abuse, stating, *"In spite of clear guidelines for reporting child abuse in the Children's Act, this is not working well and some referrals are done late."* The National Disability Support Organisation also expresses concerns that *"There's definitely a big gap with ECD programmes not addressing how teachers should be referring. And they don't know the (correct services) to refer to."* **Despite these perspectives, quantitative data reveals that the majority (76%) of ELPs report having experience referring children to a variety of auxiliary services and 62% keep referral records.**

Types of Referral services

According to Figure 15, the most common types of referrals are to health services (46%) and social workers (46%). Some case study sites are fortunate to have access to social worker services through supporting NGOs, but all sites report no support from DSD social workers, which is noted as a service gap. Regarding other kinds of referrals, 34% refer for birth certificates and 32% for Child Support Grants, with a high success rate of 95% of ELPs indicating that they received birth certificates or grants as a result of the referral. However, as mentioned previously, fewer referrals are made for disabilities (6%) or nutrition (12%).

Figure 15: Types of referral services



Accessing Services and Support

National respondents highlight **challenges accessing responsive services due to issues such as understaffing or geographic location**. Challenges with referrals are particularly seen in rural communities that are more isolated where they *"have huge issues even getting to the service. And then once they get to the service, they don't get very speedy, helpful, efficient help."* The case study sites echo these concerns, noting **delays and gaps especially in disability referral processes**. Further, a practitioner at a high-performing centre, FS1, expresses concerns about referrals and support related to **food and nutrition**, especially for poorer children.

National respondents also acknowledge, however, the efforts made by the **Department of Health (DoH) in reaching out to ELPs through immunisation campaigns and other initiatives**. The case study sites also mention **active support from provincial health services, such as child vaccinations and other related services**. References are made to additional services provided by organisations like the **South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) and Home Affairs**, and **support for grant applications is available** through ward councillors, as noted by high-performer KZN1. A principal from FS2, a high-performing site, highlights the **challenges faced by children without birth certificates** and the ELP's role in assisting parents in obtaining them, stating, *"There*

are children that come here without birth certificates. So we would request a parent to go make a birth certificate for a child and we advise them to make an affidavit so they can go make that document."

The National ECD organisation respondent provides **suggestions to strengthen referrals, including leveraging ECD forums for information dissemination and establishing links with nearby primary schools. They also identify the inclusion units of the DBE as a valuable resource if they were expanded to include ECD centres.**

Discussing Referrals with Parents

Most principals (92%) indicate that they have a strategy in place to discuss complex issues with parents. However, across the case studies, there are examples of **parents struggling to understand or accept when developmental delays or disabilities are identified**, highlighting the need for effective communication strategies in such situations. A principal from KZN1, a high-performing site, shares, *"Most parents are traditionalists and don't trust Western medication and medical assistance, preferring to believe that a child's problem is hereditary or the child has been bewitched."*

Key Results Referral Pathways

- **Capacity of ELPs to Refer:** National respondents express concerns around ELPs' capacity to make referrals, yet the majority of ELPs have experience with referrals and record keeping.
- **Types of Referrals:** The most common types of referrals include health services, social workers, birth registration and child support grants. Fewer referrals are made for nutrition services or disabilities.
- **Accessing Services and Support:** Some ELPs face challenges accessing responsive services due to issues such as understaffing and being located in rural, isolated areas, which lead to delays. However, national respondents highlight positive efforts made by various governmental departments to support referral pathways.
- **Discussing Referrals with Parents:** ELPs face challenges in dealing with parents who struggle to accept or acknowledge when a child has a disability or difficulty. This can affect the child's access to necessary support and interventions. To navigate these issues sensitively, most ELPs have a strategy in place around how to broach these topics with parents but have requested additional support from provincial education inclusion units.

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

Theme 4 focuses on exploring how ELPs engage, collaborate and support each other (Question 9); in-service training opportunities to support implementation (Question 10); mechanisms to provide guidance and mentoring to practitioners (Question 11); engagement with local municipalities (Question 12) and quality assurance monitoring and remedial action (Question 13).

Question 9

How do ELPs engage, collaborate with and support each other?

Platforms for Engagement, Collaboration and Support

According to national respondents, **ECD Forums, the South African Congress for ECD, Communities of Practice, Professional Learning Communities, and similar groups serve as valuable platforms for ELPs to engage in reflection, share experiences, receive training, and stay updated on changing policies and procedures.** Additionally, practitioners actively participate in **Facebook groups** where they share their ELP's activities and provide mutual encouragement.

In alignment, case study sites express the benefits of being members of these forums. One principal shares,

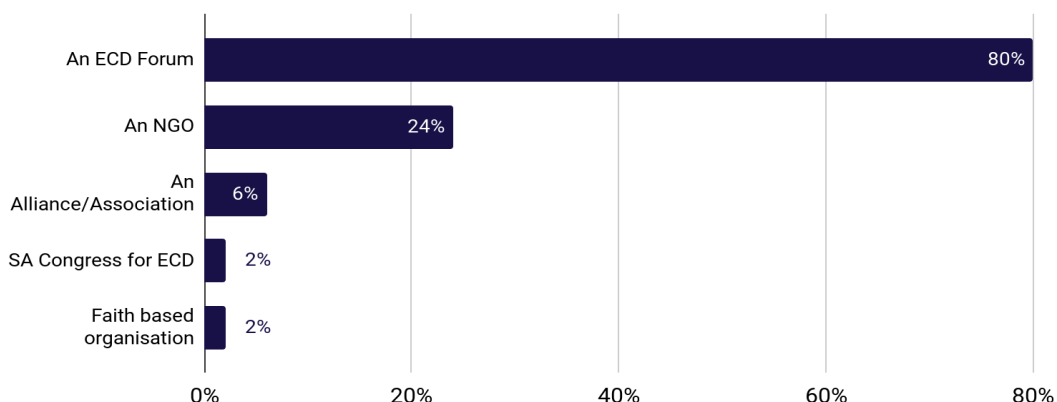
We exchange information at our monthly meeting (ECD Forum), and before COVID, the supporting NGO arranged for principals to meet at one centre to advise each other on improvements from observation. We started a stokvel to buy pots and food. (L1 Principal, high-performer).

A low-performing site, WC2, emphasises the personal development facilitated by the ECD Forum. A practitioner from WC1, a high-performer, highlights the impact of workshops and the opportunity to learn from others, saying,

Workshops have a lot of impact. You are not alone, you find teachers from other centres. By going [to workshops], we learn from others. I now have a teacher I met at those workshops who comes here with her nine children so we can share ideas.

The quantitative data indicate that a **vast majority (80%) of ELPs are part of an ECD forum**, 24% are affiliated with an NGO, 6% belong to an alliance/association, 2% are associated with the SA Congress for ECD, and an additional 2% are connected to faith-based organisations (Figure 16).

Figure 16: ELP Engagement with others



However, it should be noted that high-performing case study site, FS1, is a member of SA Childcare but does not engage in local collaboration. As a result, a practitioner from FS1 reflects that she is missing out on career development opportunities and lacks knowledge: *"I know I'm lacking somewhere, like when you talk to other teachers you feel whatever knowledge you have is not enough anymore."*

Key Findings ELP Programme Engagement

Platforms for Engagement, Collaboration and Support

- ELPs are actively involved in a diverse range of platforms, demonstrating broad participation and recognition of the importance of these platforms for professional development and collaboration within the ECD sector.
- The vast majority of ELPs are part of an ECD Forum. Other memberships include SA Congress for ECD, Communities of Practice, Professional Learning Communities and Facebook groups.

Question 10

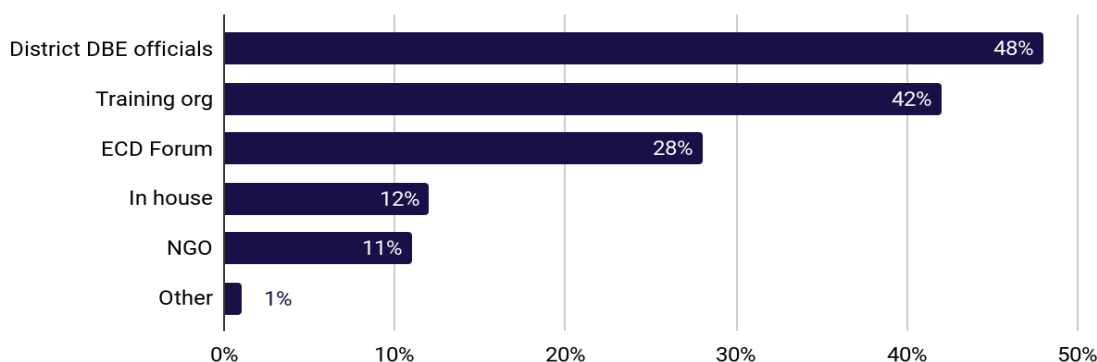
What in-service training do ECD practitioners receive to support the implementation of the NCF or other curricula?

NCF Training Opportunities

Nearly all ELP practitioners (86%) have a staff development plan in place and 90% have received training on implementing the NCF. This training is delivered through various channels including district DBE officials (48%), training organisations (42%), ELP forums (28%) and NGOs (11%) (Figure 17). Amongst high-performing case study ELPs, NGOs play a significant role in providing NCF support by offering practical assistance and training. However, **both low-performing sites**

do not mention the role of NGOs in their contexts. In addition, others rely on training via a DBE district support group. It is interesting to note that one of the private ELPs is part of a US-based online group (ABA) because the practitioner was not eligible for funded government training and could not afford to pay for it herself.

Figure 17: NCF training for practitioners



Considerations for NCF training delivery

Blended Approach to Learning

Many of the national respondents highlight their role in supporting curriculum implementation and mention the **knowledge products** they have developed or are currently using. In addition, some respondents **caution against excessive reliance on online programmes and support, emphasising the need for a blend of online resources and in-person contact.** A representative from a national parenting NGO expresses concerns, stating, "A lot of money and expense has been spent on developing the apps and digital learning tools but now people feel like they aren't working because they are missing having a facilitator and mediator of learning with people."

Collaboration for Streamlined Support

To avoid mixed messages and duplication of programmatic support services, there is a call from national respondents for collaboration between support organisations and governments. The aim of this collaboration is to establish a common set of basic standards, tools, jargon, principles, and training. A respondent from the National ECD Association emphasises the need for a structured and planned approach to external support, saying, "We need a system where external support is structured, planned and not haphazard. (Currently) Person A says one thing and Person B visiting the same site says the opposite".

Key Findings Training and Support

- **Training on NCF Implementation:** Most ELPs have staff development plans and have received training on NCF implementation through diverse channels including district DBE officials, training organisations, ELP forums and NGOs.
- **Blended Approach to Learning:** National respondents emphasise the need for a blended approach with face to face support when using online learning.
- **Collaboration for Streamlined Support:** Collaborations between government and support organisations can aid in establishing a common set of basic standards, tools, jargon and principles to enhance effectiveness and efficiency and avoid conflicting information from different service providers.

Question 11

What mechanisms and processes are in place as part of the programme's management to provide guidance and mentoring to staff in the implementation of the curriculum?

Internal Quality Monitoring Mechanisms

Internal quality monitoring is recognised as a crucial aspect of ensuring good quality programming in ELPs. For example, self-evaluation by staff plays a significant role in quality improvement systems and is highlighted as a requirement in the National Integrated ECD Policy. A Multilateral respondent also highlights the need for practitioners to have **mechanisms for self-monitoring and quality assurance in addition to external monitoring mechanisms**. However, national respondents point out that **many ELP principals lack the necessary programme expertise** to conduct quality monitoring. SA Research Association for Early Childhood Education (SARAECE) acknowledges the variation of quality monitoring practices between principals, stating:

You have a lot of principals who are brilliant... They are fully engaged with the teachers and supervising what happens in the classrooms. And then you get a lot of principals or managers who are more on the finance/admin side, and the teachers must teach.

Guidance and Mentoring

In high-performing case study sites, **principals or senior staff members are actively involved in guiding and mentoring staff, including supervision of programme planning**. For instance, FS1 has a **reporting structure** where teachers report to the supervisor who then reports to the principal, and also holds **annual reflection sessions** with management. Similar practices are observed at most ELP case study sites, where principals and staff regularly **collaborate on**

planning, conduct work checks, perform classroom observations, share insights from external staff development events, and provide orientation for new staff.

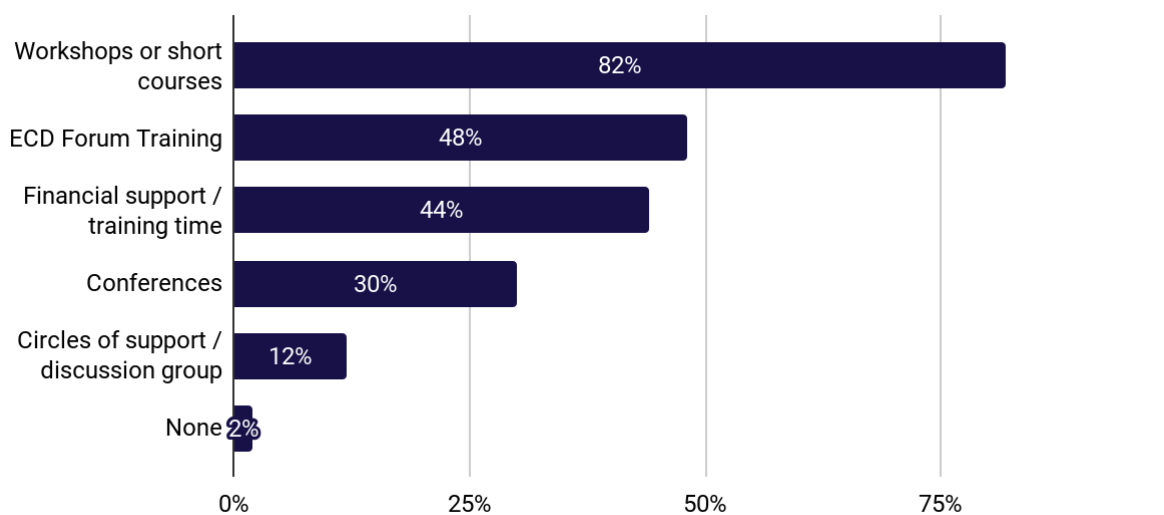
The quantitative data corroborates this, indicating that **84% of ELP principals and senior staff offer mentoring and guidance**. However, there appears to be **limited feedback on teaching techniques (30%), classroom or lesson observations (26%) or review of teaching plans (12%)**, which echo the concerns expressed by national respondents.

Moreover, **SGBs at high-performing sites, L1, FS2, and KZN1, also play a crucial role in providing hands-on support, facilitating facility improvements, and monitoring operations** to ensure smooth running of the programme, thereby contributing to overall centre quality. In FS1, members of the **Parent Advisory Group** help to foster stronger relationships between staff.

Professional Development

ELPs also receive support for ongoing professional development. The vast majority of principals indicate that practitioners attend **workshops or short courses (82%)**. Just less than half (48%) have the opportunity to participate in ECD forum training or receive financial support or time off for training (44%). Fewer, however, attend conferences (30%) or join circles of support or discussion groups (12%) (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Support for professional development provided to practitioners by the ELP



The **accessibility of resources to support ongoing professional development varies** among ELPs. **Most (84%) of practitioners have accessible copies of the NCF curriculum, 78% have books on child development, 74% have posters, but only 50% have access to curriculum planning materials.** These resources play a crucial role in facilitating effective curriculum implementation and enhancing the learning experiences of both practitioners and children.

Key Findings
Internal Mechanisms for Guidance and Mentoring

- **Internal quality monitoring mechanisms:** National respondents emphasise the necessity for ELPs to have self-monitoring mechanisms to evaluate and improve quality. However, there are concerns about centre managers' or principals' capacity to conduct monitoring activities.
- **Guidance and mentoring:** The vast majority of ELPs report receiving active guidance and mentoring from principals, senior staff members and SGBs, but the level and type of support varies. Examples include clear reporting structures, reflective sessions, collaborative planning, checks and observations, sharing learnings and staff orientation. However, there is limited feedback on teaching techniques, classroom or lesson observations and review of teaching plans.
- **Professional development:** The vast majority of practitioners have opportunities to attend workshops or short courses. Some have access to ECD forum training, financial support or time off, conferences and discussion groups.

Question 12

How do ECD programmes engage with their local municipality?

Question 13

How is the quality monitored on a regular basis and what kinds of remedial action and support is put in place when necessary? How does this take place at the following levels: ECD programme management, NGO/RTO support, DBE district/provincial, DSD district/provincial, municipality?

The following section examines the intersection of questions 12 and 13, which delve into the level of engagement between ELPs and local municipalities, including regular quality monitoring and implementation of remedial action and support. This analysis explores these aspects at multiple levels, including ECD programme management, NGO/RTO support, DBE district/provincial, DSD district/provincial, and municipality.

Governmental Structures

State quality monitoring involves district-level monitoring for compliance by DBE, while the Municipal health department focuses on health and safety monitoring. As DBE rolls out ECD coordination, there is **potential for District School-Based Support Teams to monitor inclusion programmes for children with disabilities.** According to DBE, "*[Better programme support would require] a lot of capacity building of our district staff, but also just capacity. Children who need additional support would have to be screened.*"

Capacitation of DBE

However, **the migration of many DSD officials to DBE has created a need for capacitation on curriculum implementation. National respondents note that there has been little DBE support around the learning programme at ELPs.** The National ECD Network emphasises the importance of DBE finding a way to work with training resources and understand their areas of operation. They suggest partnering with RTOs to fill the gaps.

Currently, this project's senior research team is aware from their involvement in the field that **different DBE monitoring and departmental planning templates are being used** across the country. This has led to a lack of uniformity in approach and varying official interpretation of the NCF which is not optimal. Prior to the function shift, DBE Audit data revealed that DSD visited ELPs more frequently than other departments, primarily focusing on registration and compliance. **The focus on providing support and training to registered ELPs only has been identified as a problem because many of the most marginal sites remain unregistered and therefore unsupported.** Regarding this, the National ECD Association highlights that Provincial DBE is constrained due to short staffing, which limits their capacity to support unregistered sites. They state, *"Everything DBE does is focused on registered sites. So, it's just going to perpetuate the challenge of unregistered sites not being capacitated. Further, DBE offers very little programmatic support in terms of early learning."*

Partnerships with Organisations

Partnerships are seen as crucial for improving curriculum implementation. The National ECD Association points out, *"DBE [national] needs to work in collaboration with organisations that do the actual [capacity building] work to set the standards, to devise the monitoring instruments."* This **requires resourcing and staffing of DBE officials or adopting a model similar to contracting service providers to support registration**, as done in the Western Cape. **NGOs play an important role** in providing support that indirectly affects curriculum implementation and child outcomes, including assistance with compliance, infrastructure, food, and learning resources. SARAECE states:

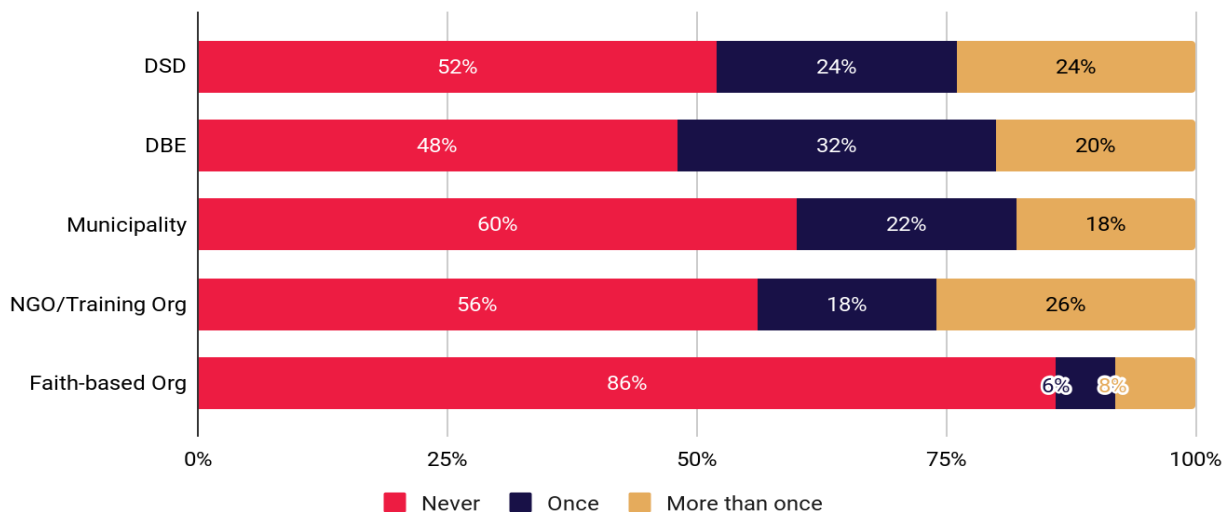
Connecting with NPO providers makes a huge difference because it's like a structure that allows those centres to access different forms of support. NPOs don't do everything. But we're very good at connecting centres with other people that do the things that they need.

External Quality Monitoring Mechanisms

In the quantitative study, principals are asked to report on the different stakeholders who conducted monitoring visits in 2022. According to these findings, **DBE, DSD, NGO training organisations, and municipalities are commonly involved in monitoring visits, with DBE visits being the most common (52%)** (Figure 19). Faith-based organisations are least involved in monitoring (14%) (Figure 19) but this is most likely due to the small proportion of faith-based

providers who take on this function. The increase in DBE visits compared to previous studies is likely to be due to the increase in DBE ECD provincial staff resulting from DSD staff moving to DBE during the function shift.

Figure 19: Monitoring of ELPs the last year



Case study sites have differential experiences with stakeholder monitoring. Most of the case study sites who service low-income communities indicate that they receive more support and monitoring from NGOs than from the government, although health departments conducted some compliance checks. High-performing sites, L1 and KZN1, report compliance checks by social workers and health departments. KZN1 has a close relationship with the provincial DBE, which organises cluster meetings and recognises them as a centre of excellence. A comment from WC2, a low-performing site, echoes the concerns of national respondents that the department should provide support for quality improvement rather than purely regulate programmes for not meeting standards. However, a concerning finding is that FS1, a well-resourced private centre and high-performer, received no official monitoring or support from any government sector in 2022: "We've had only two visits from social development in the last seven years since the preschool started." Observations from the case study researcher indicate that this site does not adhere to key curriculum principles. Provincial officials noted that, due to limited staff shortages, they focus on monitoring programmes that are less well resourced.

Key Findings

External Quality Monitoring Mechanisms

- **Governmental Structures:** The DBE is responsible for district-level monitoring for compliance while the Municipal health department is responsible for health and safety monitoring.
- **Capacitation of DBE:** The migration of many officials from the DSD to DBE has created a need for capacitation on curriculum implementation. There are different monitoring and planning templates being used, which has led to lack of uniformity in approach and interpretation of NCF. DBE focuses on registered sites, perpetuating the challenge of unregistered sites not being capacitated.
- **Partnerships with Organisations:** Partnerships with NGOs are seen as crucial in that they provide a range of support that impacts curriculum implementation and child outcomes, including assistance with compliance, infrastructure, food, and learning resources.
- **External Quality Monitoring Mechanisms:** DBE, DSD, NGO/training organisations, and municipalities are commonly involved in monitoring visits. Whilst visits from DBE are the most common, only half of ELPs had received visits in 2022, indicating a gap in support. A concerning finding was that a well-resourced private centre and high-performing FS1 received no official monitoring or support from any government sector in the last seven years.
- **Insufficient Monitoring:** The principal interview revealed that some key stakeholders did not conduct visits in 2022 for professional development and monitoring purposes.

Theme 5: Centre and Child Outcomes

The following section aims to identify factors influencing ELOM outcomes. Firstly, the quantitative study data explore which aspects of the five ELOM domains are included in the curriculum, the type of language spoken in the classroom, the practitioner environment and the classroom observation. Secondly, the HLE data is presented to showcase the factors contributing to as well as limiting child development. This section answers both Questions 14 and 15.

Question 14

The Thrive by Five data has suggested that children across the board are struggling with the following development domains: Fine Motor, Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics (ENM), and Cognition and Executive Functioning (CEF). What are the potential reasons why children are struggling in these particular domains?

Question 15

Using data from Thrive by Five to inform sampling, what are the centre-level factors that drive PD (resilience) in child-level performance on the ELOM?

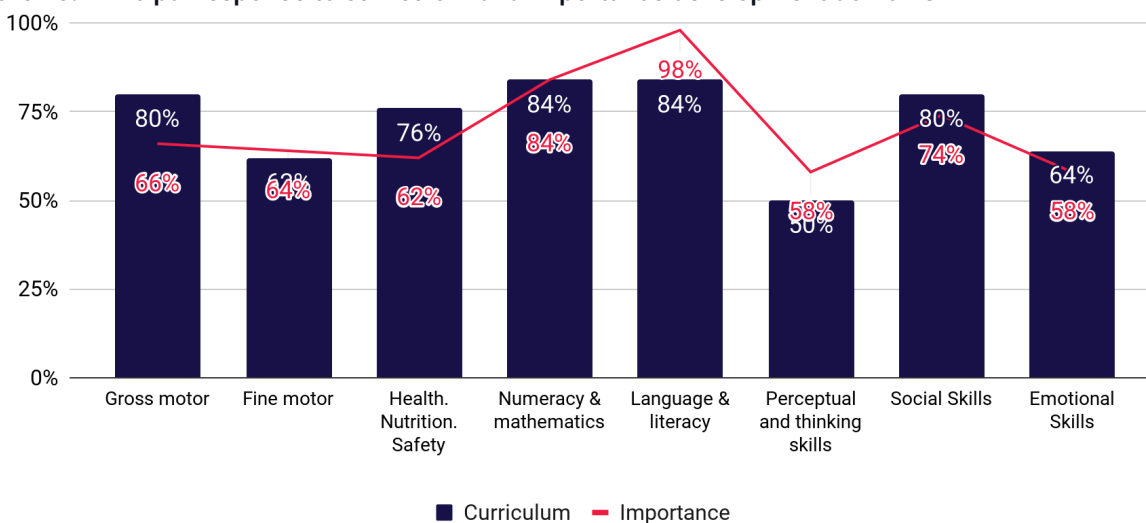
ELP-Level Factors Influencing Child Outcomes

Development Domains

A significant majority of principals highlight the inclusion of numeracy and mathematics (84%), language and literacy (84%), gross motor skills (80%), and social skills (80%) within the curriculum. Moreover, principals indicate that emotional skills (64%), fine motor skills (62%), and perception and thinking (50%) are incorporated into the curriculum.

Principals were then asked to indicate their perceptions related to the importance of each development domain for child growth and development, which is depicted as a red line in Figure 20. **In general, perceived importance is high for the majority of domains and more than half of principals express that all the development domains are crucial.** Nearly all principals highlight language literacy (98%) and numeracy and mathematics (84%) as the most important domains, followed by health and nutrition (76%), and social skills (74%). However, fewer principals highlight the importance of gross motor skills (66%), fine motor skills (64%), emotional skills (59%), and perception and thinking (58%).

Figure 20: Principal response to curriculum and importance development domains



Teaching Language

For more information about teaching language, please refer to the section on [Individualism and Inclusivity](#) in Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and Other Curricula.

Practitioner Work Environment

For more information about working conditions, please refer to the section on [Stressors in the Work Environment](#) in Theme 2: Quality of Practitioners and Learning Environment.

Classroom Observation: Teacher-learner Interactions

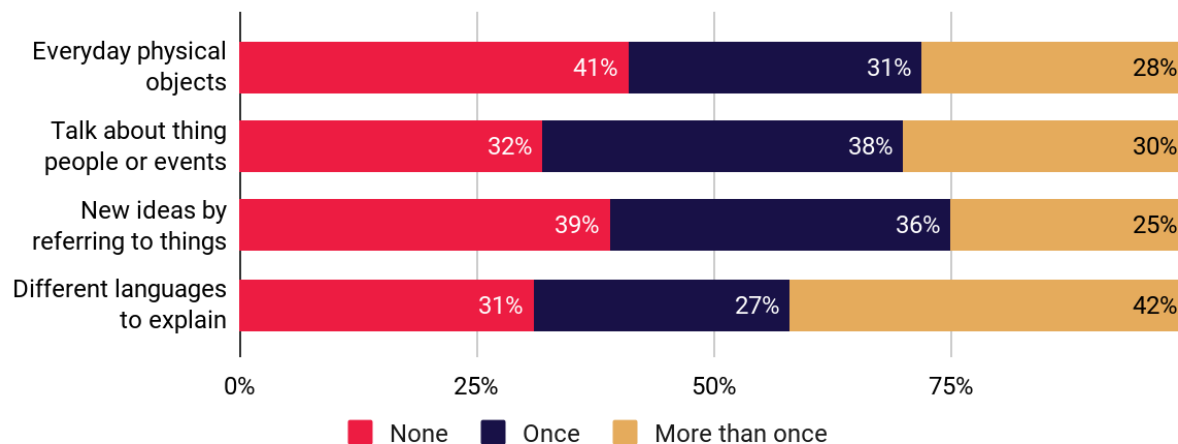
Questions 14 and 15 delve into barriers or facilitators to resilience in achieving favourable outcomes in a child's ELOM development. To observe and identify these factors, the **PLAY tool** was employed, which provides an overview of the day's activities. The observation focuses on several key dimensions, including the connection to experience, development of problem-solving skills, stimulation of a child's capacity for exploration, child and practitioner agency, establishment of a positive climate by the practitioner, and encouragement of active participation within the classroom.

Connection to Experience

The connection to experience construct of the PLAY measurement tool assesses whether the teacher establishes a link between the concepts taught in class and the real world. Figure 21 illustrates that the **majority of practitioners connect experiences to the children's real-world encounters.** Specifically, 59% of the activities provide connections to everyday objects, 68%

involve discussions about people, things, or events, 61% encouraged the exploration of new ideas based on prior knowledge, and 69% utilised multiple languages for explanation purposes.

Figure 21: Connection to experience



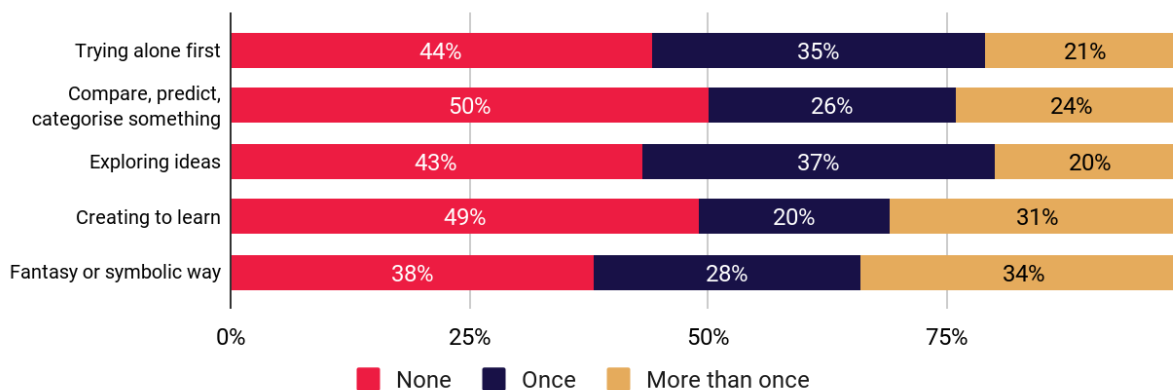
Problem Solving

The adapted version of the PLAY tool observes whether practitioners facilitate and encourage child agency within a 20-minute observed timeframe. This includes providing feedback and suggestions, encouraging answers, encouraging trying again, and whether practitioners provide tools for problem solving.

Exploration

The teacher-learner interaction tool was employed to investigate the degree to which practitioners introduce exploration into the curriculum including encouraging new experiences, facilitating comparisons, categorisations, and predictions, promoting idea exploration, creating learning opportunities, and utilising fantasy or symbolism. **Overall, approximately half of practitioners introduce a variety of elements to facilitate exploration.** Fantasy or symbolism are the most common (62% of ELPs) whereas comparing, predicting and categorising is the least common (50% of ELPs) (Figure 22). In addition, a substantial proportion of ELPs (20-34%) introduced exploration more than once.

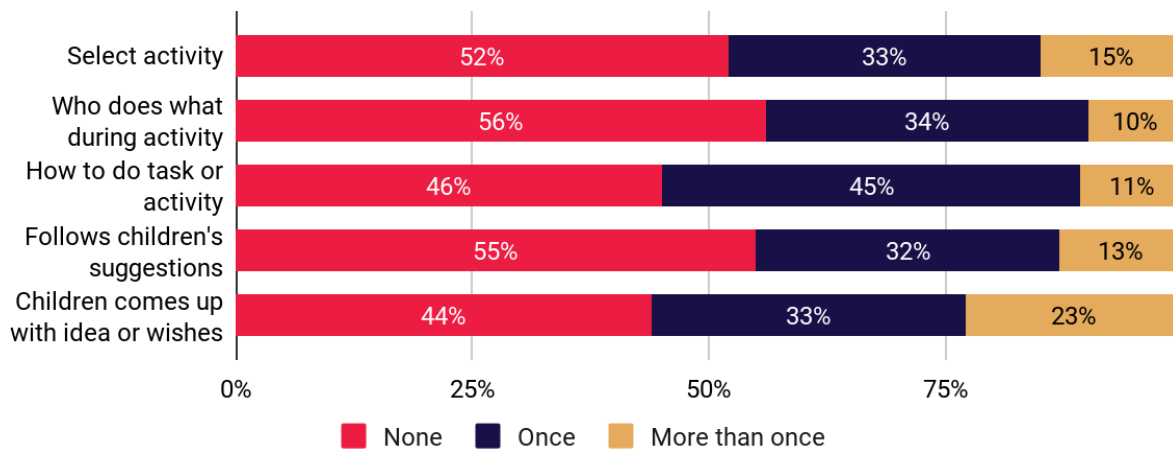
Figure 22: Exploration themes



Agency

Quantitative fieldworkers observed the interactions between children and practitioners during their daily activities to measure the extent to which practitioners foster child agency (the Lego Foundation’s PLAY tool was used for this). According to Figure 23, **approximately half of practitioners enable child agency through diverse approaches. The most common methods are supporting children in coming up with ideas or wishes that the children want to do** (56% of ELPs) and the least common being allowing children to decide who does what during activities (44% of ELPs).

Figure 23: Child’s agency

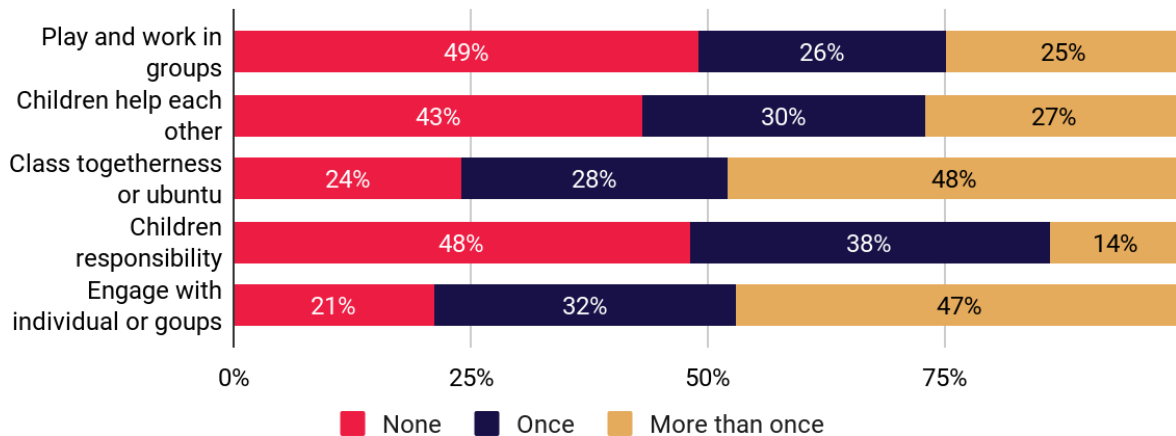


Positive Emotional Climate

A positive climate in the classroom is characterised by teachers establishing and maintaining interactions that are supportive, respectful, welcoming, and safe for all. **According to the data in Figure 24, there is variability in the kinds of ways, and how frequently, practitioners curate a**

positive climate. The majority of practitioners create a positive environment through engaging with individuals or groups and cultivating a sense of togetherness and ubuntu (79% and 76% respectively). Other signs of a positive environment are observed in approximately half of ELPs where children help each other (57%), practitioners assign children responsibilities (52%) and children play and work in groups (51%). Creating ubuntu and actively engaging with children, in particular, occur more frequently throughout the day.

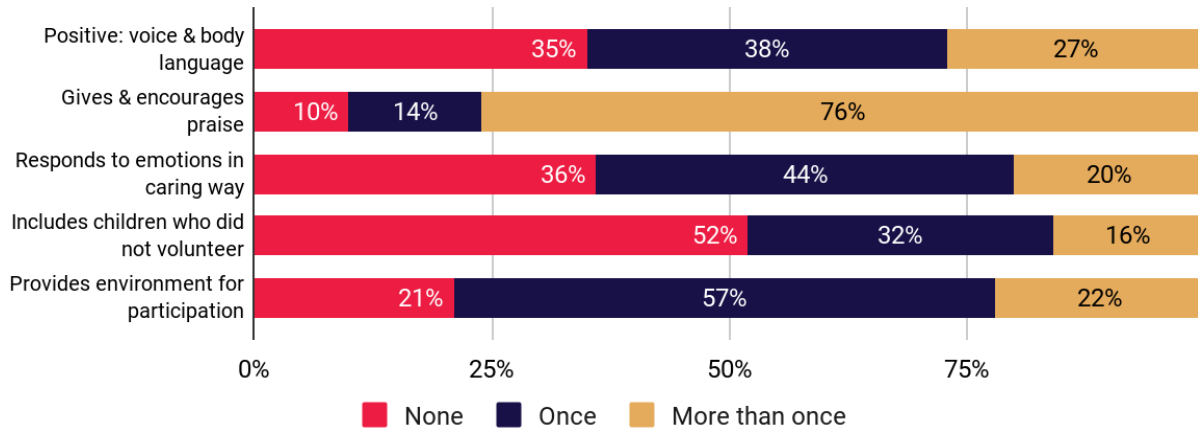
Figure 24: Positive climate



Encourage Participation

The participation aspect of the PLAY tool assesses the use of positive voice and body language by the practitioner, providing praise and encouragement, responding to emotions in a caring manner, including children who may be hesitant to volunteer, and fostering an environment conducive to participation. According to Figure 25, **it is evident that the majority of practitioners place emphasis on encouraging participation.** Nearly all practitioners give praise (90%) and 76% more than once. The majority create an encouraging environment for participation (79%), exhibit positive voice and body language (65%) and respond to emotions caringly (64%). However, only half (48%) include children even if they did not volunteer.

Figure 25: Participation



Classroom Observation: Learning Environment

Availability and Use of Resources

The learning environment checklist focuses on assessing the physical environment of ELPs. Most ELPs have sufficient space, both indoors (89%) and outdoors (95%), for the number of children. There is a wide range of learning materials and the vast majority of ELPs have access to them (Figure 26). The most accessible resources include teach and learn (i.e. Wall charts, Signs, Posters), writing, gross motor, art and maths, and the least accessible are materials on sensory play. While the majority of ELPs have access, use of these resources is lower (Figure 27).

Figure 26: Availability of resources

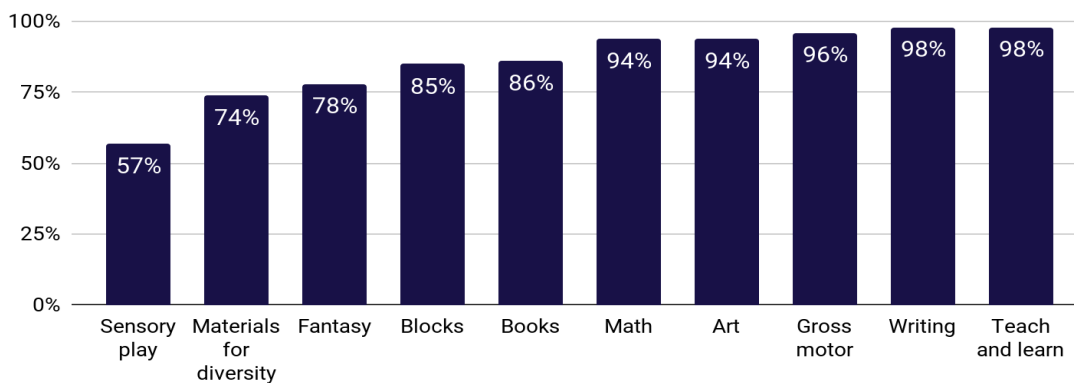
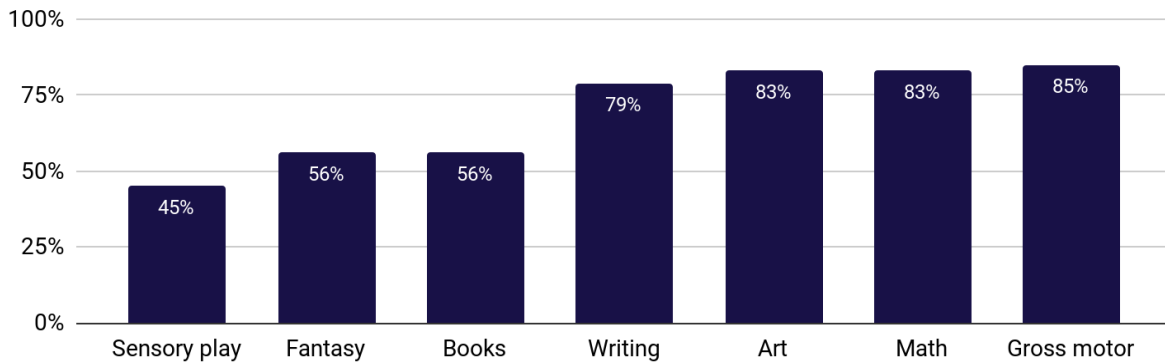


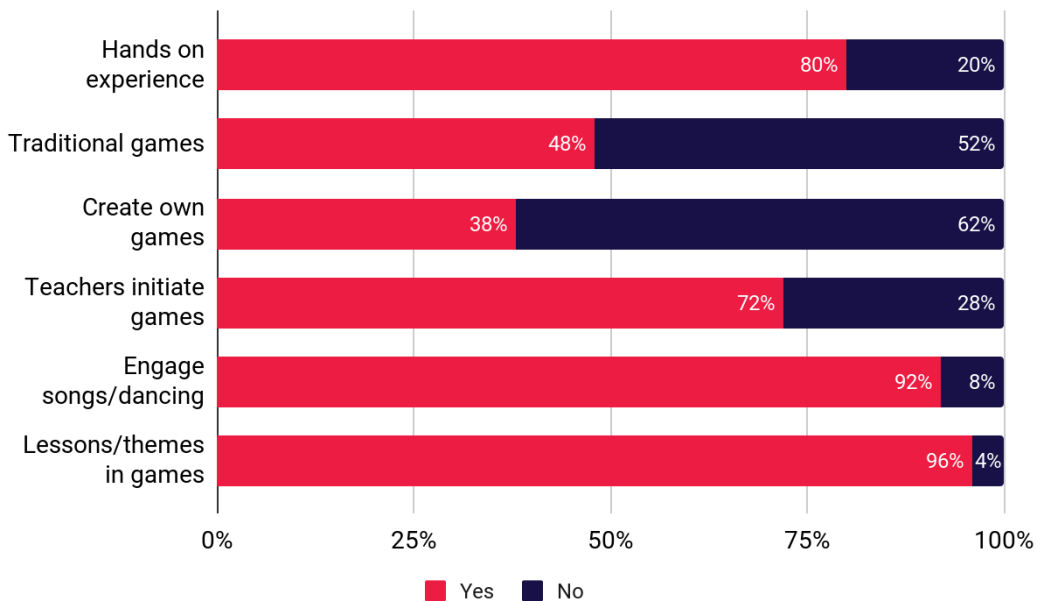
Figure 27: Use of resources



Games and Activities

Games and activities play a crucial role in facilitating learning through play. The learning environment checklist provides insights into the prevalence of various games and activities within the observed settings. According to the data in Figure 28, **there are varying degrees of uptake of games and activities.** Almost all practitioners integrate lessons, themes, or learning opportunities into games (96%), embedding educational content within play experiences, and engaging children in song and dance (92%), promoting music and movement. Less common are opportunities for children to create their own games (38%) or play traditional games (48%) such as skipping.

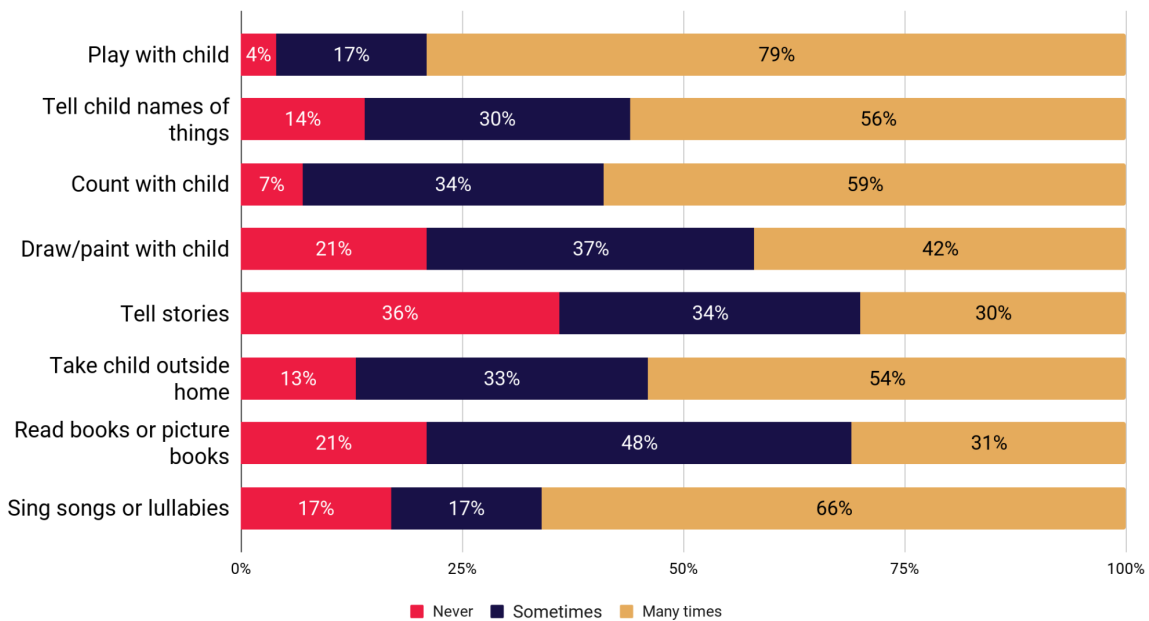
Figure 28: Games and activities



Home Learning Environment

The HLE tool is specifically designed to assess important aspects of a child's learning environment at home. This tool focuses on factors such as household size and the interactions that take place between caregivers and children. The data in Figure 29 reveals that a **vast majority of caregivers and household members actively engage children in the household in different kinds of ways**. Nearly all caregivers/household members play and count with the children (96% and 93% respectively). Most tell children names of things (86%), sing songs/lullabies (83%), read books (79%) and draw/paint (79%). The least common activity is telling stories, where one-third (36%) of caregivers/household members did not attempt to do this.

Figure 29: Caregiver or any household member's activities with child in the past week



Education of Caregivers

The data reveals valuable insights about the educational backgrounds of caregivers. **The majority (66%) of caregivers have completed matric** (12th grade in the South African education system) and 11% completed grade eleven. In terms of higher education, 28% hold a certificate, 10% have a diploma, and 7% possess a degree.

Key Findings

Outcomes: Centre and Child

- **Development Domains:** Principals perceive that the majority, if not all, domains are important but numeracy and literacy, gross motor and social skills were most widely mentioned.
- **Language Usage:** While ELPs claim to use multiple languages to accommodate children, observations show that only one-third actually do so.
- **Practitioner Environment:** Class size, practitioners' salaries, working hours, and attendance all impact performance.
- **Teacher-Learner Interactions:**
 - The majority of practitioners connect experiences to the children's real-world encounters and stimulate problem solving through encouragement of follow-up to answers and providing feedback and suggestions
 - Approximately half of practitioners introduce a variety of elements to facilitate exploration and enable child agency through diverse approaches
 - The majority of ELPs create a positive environment through engaging with individuals or groups and cultivating a sense of ubuntu
 - Practitioners place emphasis on encouraging participation, especially praise
- **Classroom Resources:** Most classrooms access and use a range of resources, but sensory play, fantasy, and books were used less during observation.
- **Home Learning Environment:** A significant majority of caregivers and household members actively engage in various activities with their children, especially playing and counting.
- **Caregivers' Education:** The majority of the caregivers completed matric and some have a higher education qualification.

Child outcomes

ELOM Scores

ELOM is an instrument used for measuring development aligned with the South African Early Learning Curriculum and is an important predictor of later school success. ELOM measures children aged four and five years (50-69 months) across five learning domains. These domains are reliably measured with 23 activities facilitated by trained ELOM assessors. The ELOM domains are as follows:

- Gross Motor Development (GMD)
- Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration (FMCVMI)
- Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics (ENM)
- Cognition and Executive Functioning (CEF)
- Emergent Literacy and Language (ELL)

Each child that completes the ELOM receives a score for each of the five domains as well as an overall score. These scores are placed within one of three performance bands indicated below.

1. **Achieving the Standard:** These children meet the learning standard and are able to complete tasks expected of their age
2. **Falling Behind:** These children are falling behind the standard and will need support in order to catch up with other children of their age
3. **Falling Far Behind:** These children are falling far behind the standard, need intensive intervention and are at risk of not catching up with their peers

The key difference between Falling Behind and Falling Far Behind is the severity of delay and the degree of intervention needed to get the child back to Achieving the Standard.

Of the 190 children assessed, while the majority of children (69%) are Achieving the Standard, 19% of children are Falling Behind and 12% are Falling Far Behind (Figure 30).

Figure 30: Overall ELOM score by performance band

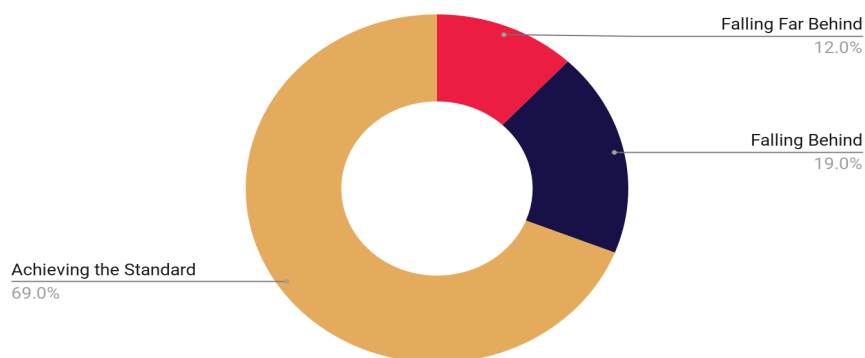
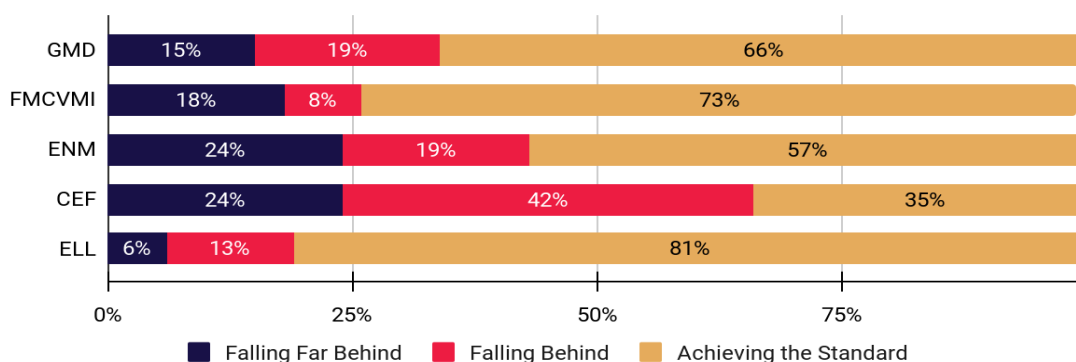


Figure 31 illustrates the ELOM scores per domain. **There is considerable variation in performance across the domains but the majority of children are Achieving the Standard with the exception of the CEF domain.**

Children perform best in the ELL domain (81% Achieving the Standard) followed by FMCVMI (73%), GMD (66%), and ENM (57%).

CEF is the only domain where only one-third of children (35%) are Achieving the Standard, and 66% are Falling Behind or Falling Far Behind. Although a minority of children are underperforming in the other four domains, the proportion of those Falling Behind or Far Behind are still significant: ENM (43% of children), GMD (34%), FMCVMI (26%) and ELN with only 19% of children. Of special concern is ENM, and again CEF, which have the highest proportions of children severely underperforming and Falling Far Behind (24% each).

Figure 31: ELOM score per domain



Social-Emotional Functioning

The Social-Emotional Functioning (SEF) measurement is a teacher rating used alongside ELOM 4 and 5 to measure a child’s social and emotional development.

Emotional Development

A set of questions is used to evaluate a child's emotional development, focusing specifically on their understanding, expression of needs and feelings, independence, ability to adapt to change, and confidence levels. The total score ranges from 0 to 18, with a score of 9 indicating adequate emotional functioning.

Among the children in this sample, there is a mean emotional development score of 10, which ranges from 3 to 12. **The vast majority (83%) of children exhibit 'adequate' emotional development scores whilst 17% exhibit 'inadequate' scores.**

Social Development

The set of social development questions focus on a child's interaction and cooperation with other children, whether they seek assistance from adults, if a child is looking for adults' ideas or explanations, and their ability to take initiative. The total score ranges from 0-24 with a cut-off of 18 indicating adequate social functioning.

The children in this sample have a mean social development score of 19, with a range from 9 to 24. **The majority of children (61%) have 'adequate' social development skills whilst 39% do not.** Interestingly, when comparing both emotional and social development scores, there are fewer children with adequate social development compared to emotional development.

Task Orientation

The task orientation score is determined based on a child's level of concentration during activities, the care and diligence they exhibit while performing tasks, and their overall interest and curiosity throughout the assessment. The highest achievable score is 12, and a score of 5 or less suggests poor persistence and attention.

Within this sample, the children's average score was 9.4. Scores varied from 0 to 12, with one child receiving a score of 0 and 63 children (33%) achieving the maximum score of 12. **Most children (84%) have 'adequate' task orientation and only a small proportion (16%) have 'inadequate' skills.**

Key Findings Child Outcomes

- **ELOM Scores:** The majority of children are Achieving the Standard overall except in Cognition and Executive Functioning. This domain and Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics have the highest proportion of children Falling Behind/Falling Far Behind.
- **SEF Scores:** The majority of children scored 'adequately' in the areas of task orientation, emotional development and social development.

Relationship Between Tools and Outcomes

Question 16

How does a new suite of tools used to measure quality learning through play, with a focus on adult-child interactions, currently under development by LEGO Foundation partners, contribute to our understanding of ECD quality?

Question 17

What is the association between scores on these [quality of interaction] tools and child development outcomes (e.g. ELOM)?

The goal of this analysis is to explore the association between scores for the PLAY tool and ELOM. Specifically, this analysis aims to determine whether higher ratings of practitioner support for children's engagement in classrooms are positively correlated to stronger child development outcomes.

Approach

A two-phase approach was taken to investigate the association between the PLAY tool scores and ELOM scores (including subdomains). First, correlations between ELOM scores and a large range of potential explanatory variables is explored. These variables are derived from the instruments used during fieldwork: PLAY tool, practitioner interview, principal interview, learning environment, and home learning environment. A non-parametric approach is taken because the

scores for the FMCVMI, ENM and ELL domains are not normally distributed and the sample size is small. Spearman's rank test is used for continuous or ordinal variables, and Wilcoxon rank-sum test is used for binary variables.

Second, we use adjusted logistic regressions to explore associations between ELOM (i.e. 'On track' or 'Not on track'), the PLAY tool scores and statistically significant explanatory variables identified in phase 1. We expect some of the variability in ELOM scores to be related to variables associated with the ELPs themselves (for example practitioner ability, classroom resources, etc). In order to account for this and improve the accuracy of estimates, the regressions incorporate clustered standard errors by ELP. Lastly, regression model diagnostics were conducted using continuous ELOM scores to justify the validity of the method taken (See [Appendix 3](#) for more information).

Correlations between ELOM scores and quality of interaction

Below is a list of variables, grouped by theme, that are found to be statistically significantly correlated with at least one of the ELOM domains.

Children's characteristics

- Age (in months)
- Socio-economic status (proxied for by fee price)

Classroom characteristics

- Number of learners enrolled in the classroom
- Whether the practitioner conducts GM-related activities
- Whether the practitioner conducts FMCVMI-related activities
- Whether there are opportunities for the child to look at books

Practitioner characteristics

- Practitioner salary

Parent support

- The proportion of parents actively supporting the ELP (e.g., through attending parent teacher meetings, supporting fundraisers etc.)

Curriculum

- Whether the programme includes a balance of small group, large group, and free play activities
- Whether the curriculum covers GMD, FMCVMI, CEF, ENM, and/or Language & Literacy

Classroom observation scores

- Exploration
- Agency

- Participation
- Positive climate

Regression Analysis

The logistic regression models and corresponding odds-ratios, adjusted for potential confounders, are presented in table 4 below stratified by theme. Each column represents a separate regression for each ELOM domain and Total ELOM. Results that are statistically significant at the 5% level are indicated with an asterisk (*) and results that are statistically significant at the 1% level are denoted with a double asterisk (**).

Child and ELP Background

Child age in months, ELP fees and practitioner salary are found to be significant predictors of ELOM outcomes when adjusted for other variables. Notably, gender, enrolment numbers and the level of parent support appears to not have a significant bearing on ELOM outcomes. For every one month increase in a child's age, the odds of being 'On track' for ENM, CEF and total ELOM score increases by 15%, 21% and 11%, respectively.

However, school fees (which proxies SES) and practitioner salaries provide less coherent results. When comparing children with fees more than and less than R110/month, children with higher fees have a 2.85-fold increased odds of being 'On track' for GMD, but have an 82% decrease in those odds for ENM. Similarly, children who attend ELPs where the practitioner earns more than R2000 per month experience an 81% decrease in the odds of being 'On track' for FMCVMI compared to ELPs where practitioners earn less.

Table 4. Adjusted logistic regression model for Child and ELP Background						
Variable	Gross motor (GMD)	Fine & visual motor (FMCVMI)	Numeracy & math (ENM)	Cognitive & exec function (CEF)	Literacy & lang (ELL)	Tot ELOM score
Child and ELP Background						
Age in months	1.05	0.89	1.15**	1.21**	1.08	1.11*
Child female	1.03	1.80	1.30	2.51	1.32	1.40
ELP fees more than R110/month	2.85*	1.19	0.18**	1.28	7.14	0.75
Number of children enrolled	0.96	1.02	0.94	0.94	1.00	0.97
Practitioner earns more than R2000/month	0.67	0.19**	0.75	0.45	0.37	0.32
More than half of	0.49	0.52	1.76	1.36	0.36	0.86

Table 4. Adjusted logistic regression model for Child and ELP Background

Variable	Gross motor (GMD)	Fine & visual motor (FMCVMI)	Numeracy & math (ENM)	Cognitive & exec function (CEF)	Literacy & lang (ELL)	Tot ELOM score
parents involved in supporting the centre						
Constant	0.06	1133	0.01	0.01	8.66	0.01
Observations	173	173	173	173	173	173
Adjusted R-squared	0.13	0.21	9.23	0.30	0.30	0.19

PLAY Tools

According to the adjusted logistic regression model, data collected from the PLAY tool suggest that agency and positive climate significantly influences ELOM scores, whilst connecting to experience, problem solving, exploration and participation does not. On average and holding all else equal, each unit increase in Agency score increases the odds of being 'On track' for GMD by 36%. Each unit increase in Positive Climate improves the odds of being 'On track' for ENM and CEF by 40% and 36%, respectively.

Table 5. Adjusted logistic regression model for PLAY Tool

Variable	Gross motor (GMD)	Fine & visual motor (FMCVMI)	Numeracy & math (ENM)	Cognitive & exec function (CEF)	Literacy & lang (ELL)	Tot ELOM score
PLAY Tool						
Connection to experience	0.85	0.90	0.74	0.73	0.66	0.88
Problem solving	1.12	0.98	0.88	1.00	1.71	0.93
Explore	0.75	0.85	1.04	0.85	0.82	0.79
Agency	1.36**	0.97	1.21	1.02	1.16	1.27*
Positive climate	1.05	0.96	1.40**	1.36*	1.15	1.54**
Participation	0.96	1.09	1.03	0.99	1.02	0.90
Constant	0.06	1133	0.01	0.01	8.66	0.01
Observations	173	173	173	173	173	173
Adjusted R-squared	0.13	0.21	9.23	0.30	0.30	0.19

Child Development Areas Covered by ELP Activities

With regards to child development areas covered by ELP activities, balance of free play vs structured activities, GMD activities and use of educational toys or mathematical materials are significant factors associated with ELOM outcomes.

In particular, children in ELPs that offer indoor and outdoor GMD activities (to promote skills such as running, balancing, hopping, skipping, climbing, throwing and catching) show significantly higher odds of being 'On track' for all ELOM domains than those that do not. When broken down by ELOM domain, there is a 2.57-fold increase in odds for FMCVMI, 3.44-fold for GMD, 6.31-fold for ELL, 6.61-fold for ENM, 12.71-fold for CEF, and 5.78-fold overall. Counterintuitively, programmes that have a good balance of free play, small group activities and large group activities experience an 85% decrease in the odds of being 'On track' for ELL. Lastly, classes where children were observed using educational toys or maths materials have a 3.10-fold increased odds of being 'On track' for FMCVMI than children in classes where this is not observed.

Table 6. Adjusted logistic regression model for Child Development Areas Covered by Classroom Activities						
Variable	Gross motor (GMD)	Fine & visual motor (FMCVMI)	Numeracy & math (ENM)	Cognitive & exec function (CEF)	Literacy & lang (ELL)	Tot ELOM score
Child Development Areas Covered by Classroom Activities						
Programme includes a balance of free play, small group, large group activities	1.05	0.82	0.43	0.76	0.15**	0.75
Teacher conducts activities for gross motor development	3.44**	2.57*	6.61**	12.71**	6.31*	5.78*
Teacher conducts activities for fine motor development?	1.44	1.64	0.15	1.22	0.02	0.54
Children observed using educational toys or maths materials	1.95	3.10*	1.78	1.47	0.61	2.91
There are open-ended materials	1.31	1.63	0.62	1.03	0.35	0.33
There are opportunities for children to look at books	0.76	1.17	1.63	1.42	0.79	1.59

Table 6. Adjusted logistic regression model for Child Development Areas Covered by Classroom Activities

Variable	Gross motor (GMD)	Fine & visual motor (FMCVMI)	Numeracy & math (ENM)	Cognitive & exec function (CEF)	Literacy & lang (ELL)	Tot ELOM score
Constant	0.06	1133	0.01	0.01	8.66	0.01
Observations	173	173	173	173	173	173
Adjusted R-squared	0.13	0.21	9.23	0.30	0.30	0.19

Key Findings

Relationship between Tools and Outcomes

- The most influential predictor of ELOM outcomes is whether the teacher conducts GMD-focused activities, impacting a child's 'On track' status across all ELOM domains. Other predictors included Classroom Observation scores for Agency and Positive Climate, along with ELP fees exceeding R110 per month.
- Although the analysis showcased GMD-focused activities as a promising factor for overall child development, the study's limitations (as mentioned in the [limitations section](#) above) necessitate further research before making more confident assertions. The variety of GMD equipment in an ELP has been shown to be significantly associated ($p = <0.1$) with CEF in a current analysis of ELOM and LPQA data.

Findings from the Case Studies

This short synthesis of key features of the high-performing ELPs illustrate how multiple factors contribute to high quality learning programme implementation and good child learning outcomes. All of these require consideration for a DBE quality improvement strategy. More information on the case study sites is available in [Appendix 1](#).

Four of the five high-performing sites serve poor communities and they battle for funding to pay staff, provide food for children and to maintain buildings and equipment. They nevertheless manage to provide a good quality ECD experience for children and to be an asset to their communities. They all had different ways of achieving this, but there were some good basic lessons to be learned from all of them. The fifth high-performing centre is an outlier; it charges higher fees and is well-resourced. This site has good child outcomes, but they have very few contacts with the surrounding community. The two underperforming ELPs, although well-meaning, are lacking in some of the key areas discussed below.

While case study sites vary in the programmes they offer and what is emphasised, there are common characteristics. All five high-performing sites offer a holistic and varied curriculum with opportunities for free and more structured play as well as problem solving and learning to be independent. Staff understand and are able to articulate their learning goals and methods for children. Interactions with children are warm and respectful. There is awareness of individual children's needs and the programme is adapted to support these. In several sites there is a strong focus on local and indigenous content, supporting home-to-school transition and diversity. Adherence to the NCF itself is less significant than these teaching and interactive practices.

Most teaching staff at the four lower-income high-performing sites have ECD NQF 4 or 5 qualifications, and there is a strong focus on continuing professional development through internal support and mentoring, joint planning, and access to external workshops and courses. Three ELPs receive regular curriculum support from NGOs and the KZN centre is also part of a DBE support network. Support networks of this sort not only provide direct instruction on the NCF, but also examples of best practice which can be discussed and critically evaluated by the group.

Leadership and management, guidance and mentoring, SGB support, and good staff relations are hallmarks of the four ELPs serving low income children. All the high-performing sites engage parents and there are efforts to keep them informed about the ECD programme activities. However, parental engagement can still be strengthened. Where necessary, there are referrals to health, home affairs, and especially, SASSA.

However, even in these high-performing sites, some gaps are evident. Only two sites report an appropriate learning programme for their baby and toddler classes, and if equipment is lacking, it is this age group that is typically disadvantaged. Staff in these classes are least trained, sometimes due to attrition of trained baby care staff as a result of high staff turnover. Even within the sites that report implementing NCF, not all staff are trained and many practitioners request

simplification of the concepts and support with implementation. In particular, two principals would like management training to improve their management skills. Several parents would like the curriculum to focus more on IT literacy. Referrals for suspected delays and disabilities as well as suspected inadequate nutrition are limited. The need for more support to identify, inform parents and provide a suitable programme for children with disabilities is widespread.

Support Ecosystem Enablers to Quality Education

A central core of people experienced in their role (educational or administrative) and drawn to working with children is a key enabler for quality education. This has the advantage of ensuring continuity through the commitment and efficiency of this core team. They can integrate new and inexperienced staff members when the need arises without compromising the services being offered. All high-performing ELPs have a strong core team. For example, in KZN1, the principal is a retired high school teacher who has handpicked staff with similar ideals and has an SGB with business skills. The principal oversees lesson planning and teaching practices, while the SGB reviews budgets, income and expenditures and relieves her of those responsibilities. The L1 ELP has been in operation for three decades with three generations of the same family involved. The staff run a culturally appropriate programme for that community, strengthening ties between home and ELP experiences for the children.

Within ELPs, a good working relationship between staff members built on respect and shared goals is an advantage. All but one of the five high-performing centres have easy, friendly communications between staff. The outlier, FS1, where staff are polite and formal in their interpersonal dealings, but for some, as expressed in interviews with the researcher, this masked resentment that cultural and religious differences are being ignored. It nevertheless has other strengths, such as good teaching resources and well-appointed premises, which make it possible to continue to provide a good service. The same is not true of the two low-performing sites, which have less cohesion, and sometimes quarrels break out.

A close and supportive relationship with NGOs and/or DBE has the advantage of frequent monitoring and mentoring of the ECD processes to help ELPs maintain high standards. These connections also bring in new ideas and a broader perspective on child care. This is a two-way relationship; it also keeps the ECD organisations or district staff grounded, hearing first-hand about the barriers and enablers to inform their work. These kinds of close relationships are true of all high-performing sites except FS1 again. In the case of FS1, the outlier ELP receives their external advice and training support via distance learning programmes.

Changing out-of-date views on child-rearing through close relationships with parents is also an important factor impacting quality education and outcomes. Close relationships with ELPs allays parents' anxieties about their child's development because they are able to discuss issues with practitioners. WC1 reports some of the following discussions: why harsh discipline should be avoided; effective strategies to change difficult behaviour in children; how to instil resilience and confidence that will make it easier for children to face difficulties as they grow up; and where to

seek help if the child has a disability. SGBs that arrange outings for children or facilitate discussions about proposed infrastructure changes play a wonderful part in cementing relationships with parents, which benefit both the ELP and the children. The combination of personal advice and feedback on the child's development lead parents to appreciate the value of the ELP. Parents also cite rapid improvement in the child's social behaviour and speech (WC1) and the partnership that developed between the family and the centre (FS2). These experiences enhance the popularity of the centre and have important spinoffs for the sustainability of the centre, such as referrals and increased enrolment of children in the future.

Contact with public services as part of community development has benefits not only to the children at the ELP but also for the community at large. For example, visits from community health nurses to check vaccinations or treat for parasites can improve health within the centre and community. Infectious diseases are easily spread within schools and preschools, so preventive measures are important. In addition, social workers can reach children in distress if notified by ELPs, which can play a positive role in their communities in terms of the health, development and safety of the children.

Municipalities that respond to the needs of children by providing municipal land and infrastructure for ELPs in safe and convenient localities can further uplift the municipality. For example, KZN1 and 2 benefit from this, whereas the municipality where FS2 is situated has simply ignored requests to allow children to use the vacant land adjacent to the site as a playground. Access to libraries is also noted as important for access to sufficient children's books in local languages, often noted as lacking in ELPs.

All the high-performing centres could strengthen the quality of their programmes if supported by adequate funding provided at the right time. None of the case study sites feel that they are financially secure, as all relied to some extent on parental fee payments. While staff in the high-performing ELPs spoke without exception of their lifelong passion for and joy in developing young children, their salaries are deplorable. Even in the upper band private site, senior practitioners earn R3000 per month and in Limpopo salaries are as low as R500–749 per month. At several ELPs, salaries are not paid regularly due to late receipt of subsidies and/or poor fee recovery. Long working hours and leave mostly limited to the end of the year causes exhaustion and stress. Time spent by the principal meeting registration requirements, water shortages and vulnerability to theft of some sites also reduces their time available to focus on the learning programme. It is remarkable under these conditions that these ELPs are able to provide high-performing learning programmes and that children do so well.

Recommendations

An evidence-based approach for addressing identified gaps and challenges is a crucial step toward creating an optimal support ecosystem for ELPs to ensure high-quality ECE and positive child outcomes. Key findings from the study suggest the need for multiple interventions to improve learning quality and child outcomes. The following section provides key recommendations based on main study findings per theme with a focus on critical and realistic interventions.

Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and Other Curricula

The DBE already has a number of initiatives in place or in the pipeline to address gaps in the delivery of the NCF, play-based pedagogy and responsiveness to individual children's needs including those with delays and disabilities. These include the development of support materials, NCF training under the auspices of the Provincial Education Departments, development of a Human Resource Development Plan for ECD and a QASS.

Short- to Medium-Term Recommendations

- 1) Ongoing NCF training should be more practical. Ideally training should include some on-site support and be offered by trained staff, experienced in the ECD curriculum. This could be offered as a focus of the QASS, could potentially be modules endorsed by the South African Council for Educators (SACE) and should include:
 - a. Targeted training on implementing the NCF learning guidelines for baby and toddler groups, which are often neglected.
 - b. Unpacking play pedagogy and the play continuum, including using different types of play to promote learning, how to set up the class to enable free choice and problem solving (the online PLAY SA module⁶ would be useful support for this).
 - c. Guidance on how to approach communication and language in ELPs as they transition to the Language in Education Policy. While use of home languages is a principle of the NCF, there are many multilingual classes, and some parents insist on English. This makes it challenging for practitioners to exclusively use home languages and ELPs require guidance on how to navigate this issue.
 - d. Access to and training on the use of the existing standardised and age- and stage-graded NCF related formative child assessment tool based on the ELDA will

⁶ See <https://playsa.org> for details of this free module

enable a stronger focus on teaching that accommodates individual children's strengths and weaknesses as well as the identification of developmental delays.

- e. Training on simple but standardised DBE NCF planning templates, which provides structure yet encourages flexibility from teaching staff depending on the context and children's interests.
- 2) In support of point 1, DBE should fast track distribution of and training on several support materials initiatives that have been commissioned with UNICEF support to provide more structured guidance on core aspects of NCF implementation:
- a. Guideline and Learning and Teaching Materials for the Implementation of the South African NCF for Children – Birth to Four Years. This also includes material on supporting children with disabilities.
 - b. The current DBE/UNICEF tender for learning and teaching support material for the NCF.
 - c. The NCF Formative Assessment Guide and training materials, which should address the need for more individualised training for ELPs and targeted support and referral.
 - d. Teacher Learning Materials on Play-based Learning for ECD Guides for NQF 4 – 7 produced for the DHET with UNICEF assistance. These provide ideas for a short, additional module on play for use in accredited training programmes.
- 3) Provision of play packs of materials with training on how to use them would support delivery of the curriculum.
- 4) Guidance on how to implement the NCF in the mixed age classes common in low income ELPs due to smaller enrolments and/or lack of classrooms.
- 5) Draw in DBE Inclusion Directorate with support from their ECD NPO partners in an intensive focus on training and support for ELPs to include children with disabilities, provide adequate individual education plans and liaise with parents about their needs.

Theme 2: Quality Practitioners and Learning Environment

The gap in ECD qualifications and the need for ongoing professional development is well documented, and there have been public and private sector initiatives to address this for many decades.

Short- to Medium-Term Recommendations

- 1) Create professional learning circles/Communities of Practice for ECD practitioners possibly leveraging ECD Forums and/or social media platforms.
- 2) Finalise the QASS framework and support package which focuses on key areas identified as promoting quality in this study - learning programme implementation, support for inclusion of children with delays and disabilities, leadership and management support, work with parents.

Medium- to Long-Term Recommendations

In the medium- to long-term, there should be a focus on professionalisation of ELP staff and improvement of ELP quality through:

- 1) Financial support for enrolment in:
 - a) the Higher Education Sub-Framework ECCE qualifications (especially at Levels 5 and 6), which will develop a core of professional ECE teachers.
 - b) the Occupational ECD Practitioner Certificate (level 4) for unqualified practitioners.
 - c) the recently scoped Higher Certificate for ECD Managers as good leadership and management is associated with ELP quality.
- 2) Training should be offered through a variety of training delivery formats – in person, online, and blended to make it more easily accessible.
- 3) Incremental roll out of different elements of the QASS support package from an initial targeting of the poorest quality ELPs to a system that includes all ELPs.
- 4) Continuing support for improved working conditions for ELP staff through increased grant in aid subsidies, which enable payment of adequate wages and application of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

Theme 3: Parental Engagement and Access to Auxiliary Services

Most ELPs have in place the basic parent engagement requirements specified in the Regulatory Framework such as keeping communication, providing progress reports, and alerting parents to problems. The importance of this should continue to be emphasised in ongoing monitoring of ELPs.

Short- to Medium-Term Recommendations

In addition, there is a need for ELPs to be assisted on an ongoing short to long term basis to:

- 1) Communicate with parents about the learning programme/curriculum, the value of play for early learning, and their role in supporting early learning at home. The recent UNICEF Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices of Caregivers study provides useful pointers as to parent perceptions of learning through play and factors which make this difficult to implement at home.
- 2) Suggest activities and resources to support parents in their role as teachers of their children at home.
- 3) Find effective ways of reaching difficult to reach parents such as those who are disengaged or have work commitments.
- 4) Be capacitated in understanding the role of ELPs in referring parents to other services the child may need and supported in the referrals process. This should include a focus on child grants, birth certificates, health services and referral for suspected delays and disabilities, including what referral channel to use.

To support this, DBE and other public and private ECD stakeholders should cooperate to:

- 1) Offer parenting information and link ELPs to existing parent capacitation programmes, social media and tech innovations such as Apps with learning activities to do with children aimed at parents/caregivers. This could be coordinated in a national parenting advocacy campaign as envisaged in the National Integrated ECD policy.
- 2) Set up a simple but effective referral system through provincial/district ECD coordination structures and with civil society partners. This should be monitored and tracked as part of ongoing compliance monitoring so that difficulties in accessing services can be formally addressed.

In the short-term specifically:

- 1) Clarify the support that can be offered by provincial DBE inclusion teams and DoH staff where disabilities and developmental delays are identified.
- 2) Map the different parenting programmes available, including their content focus and geographic areas they currently cover and where they could potentially extend their services. In addition, develop a plan for how other unserved areas could be covered.

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

Study findings suggest that while there is ongoing official monitoring of ELPs, curriculum implementation is not currently the core focus of monitoring visits. Training on the NCF should be backed up with internal and external support, preferably at the ELP site level.

Short- to Medium-Term Recommendations

- 1) Common standards and guidelines for curriculum support should be developed and disseminated so that there is understanding and alignment of NPO and DBE guidance.
- 2) Ensure that provincial education department staff who were previously attached to social development are adequately capacitated on the ECD curriculum and its implementation.
- 3) Develop a collaborative, multipronged plan for ongoing guidance, mentoring and support for ELPs including official monitoring visits, utilisation of ECD NPOs and ECD forums.
- 4) Pilot the development of Professional Learning Communities for ECD practitioners to gather and share best practice examples for implementing at scale and with quality. Use platforms such as ECD forums, to promote reflection and self-monitoring for improvement. These platforms should especially be available where there is limited ECD NPO support.
- 5) Clarify local government responsibilities towards ELPs regarding ECD infrastructure support and in providing support against crime.

Medium- to Long-Term Recommendations

- 1) Increase budget allocations for employing provincial education department staff to assist ELPs with quality improvement and/or outsource to quality support workers based in ECD RTOs in a robust and well-managed programme overseen by provincial departments.
- 2) Ensure that official selection of provincial ECD support initiatives and compliance monitoring and support is available immediately to unregistered sites who meet basic safety requirements as well as to private high-fee sites.
- 3) Motivate and build principals' capacity to provide internal support on the learning programme through information and guidelines and short courses for those who lack the necessary skills. Alternatively, link ELPs to an experienced programme in the area (centre of excellence model) for this support.

Theme 5: Outcomes Centre and Child

Recommendations for Development Domains:

- 1) Provide additional resources and training for practitioners to enhance their understanding and implementation of numeracy, literacy, gross motor, and social skill development.
- 2) Encourage practitioners to incorporate activities and strategies that promote numeracy, literacy, gross motor, and social skill development into their daily routines and lesson plans.
- 3) Foster collaboration among practitioners to share best practices and effective strategies for promoting development in these domains.

Recommendations for Language Usage:

- 1) Offer professional development opportunities for early learning practitioners to improve their ability to use and support multiple languages in the classroom.
- 2) Provide resources and materials that facilitate the use of multiple languages, such as bilingual books, language learning tools, and cultural resources.
- 3) Encourage partnerships with families and communities that can contribute to the promotion and support of multiple languages.

Recommendations for Practitioner Environment:

- 1) Evaluate and adjust class sizes to ensure an optimal ratio of practitioners to children, allowing for more personalised attention and meaningful interactions.
- 2) Provide stipends for salaries.

Recommendations for Teacher-Learner Interactions:

- 1) Provide professional development opportunities focused on promoting meaningful connections between children's experiences and real-world encounters.
- 2) Encourage practitioners to use a variety of approaches and techniques to facilitate exploration and foster child agency.
- 3) Promote the use of positive and constructive feedback, as well as suggestions, to support children's problem-solving skills and overall development.

Recommendations for Classroom Resources:

- 1) Ensure that classrooms have a sufficient supply of sensory play materials, fantasy elements, and books to promote diverse learning experiences.
- 2) Encourage practitioners to incorporate these resources into their lesson plans and daily activities to enhance children's engagement and curiosity.

Recommendations for Home Learning Environment:

- 1) Provide caregivers with resources and guidance on how to engage in various activities that support their children's learning, including play-based learning and counting exercises.

- 2) Foster partnerships between practitioners and caregivers to exchange information, share strategies, and promote a consistent approach to learning at home and in the classroom.

Recommendations for Caregivers' Education:

- 1) Offer opportunities for caregivers to further their education and acquire higher qualifications in early childhood development.
- 2) Provide information and resources to help caregivers understand the importance of their role in supporting children's learning and development.
- 3) Partner with community organisations and educational institutions to offer accessible and affordable educational programmes for caregivers.

Case Study Findings

Many learnings about factors supporting quality early learning are covered in the recommendations for themes 1 to 4, however the case studies highlight how the entire support ecosystem is critical for high quality ELP delivery. This takes place at every level of the system, national, provincial and, most importantly for service implementation, local level. The current ECD policy review affords an opportunity to improve vertical and horizontal coordination structures and accountability.

Recommendation

Focus on establishing effective local level coordination of ECD regulatory, training and support stakeholders to ensure that all ELPs receive all the necessary assistance for ongoing quality improvement.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Case Studies

The following case studies are designed to bring out key insights from the many lively accounts, interviews, FGDs and observations made during the qualitative research. For the below reasons, this deeper dive into the thinking of ECD personnel has the potential to generate new hypotheses on how best to proceed with efforts to improve ELPs in the country.

They showcase how the high-performing sites all provide a varied and holistic curriculum and play pedagogy but also how ELDA's like Identity and Belonging are interpreted very differently in different sites and are weighted differently in implementing the ELPs. Knowledge of the World is another ELDA that is interpreted differently across sites, mainly determined by their environment and connectivity. The level at which the high-performing sites are connected in their immediate environment to organisations and institutions adds value to their activities. It also highlights the importance of community development of well-run early education sites. Rural sites, in particular, experience more limitations due to a lack of venues for school visits and poor connectivity for virtual visits. For example, a practitioner at a high-performing rural site deals with this situation utilising NCF guidelines. She starts a discussion about cows and extends it to other animals, using the opportunity to discuss new vocabulary and links the activity to the Communication ELDA.

The case studies demonstrate how ongoing training and support can raise the capabilities of practitioners to the point where they can assess children through their observations of play behaviour - as the NCF advocates. In one site, a practitioner shares how one child only cooperated with her when she demonstrated activities to him but became cross and difficult when she spoke to him. In addition to the practitioner's concerns, his mother had been worried about her child's difficult disposition, and through this careful observation, the practitioner realised that he had hearing issues. This early recognition of the child's difficulty by a well-trained, experienced and motivated practitioner positively affected the child. The views from the parent FGD emphasise the value of engaging parents as partners in the child's education, allaying anxieties for the child's safety and helping them cope with child-rearing difficulties.

Free State 1

Free State 1 (FS 1) High-Performing Site

- This ELP was selected based on a high average ELOM score of 83, having higher fees, being well-resourced and serving a middle-class community. The Curriculum score is 8, which is lower than the group average (9.76; SD 2.67). The Learning Environment checklist score is 30.5 compared with the group average of 33.28 (SD 5.34). It is nevertheless interesting as this is the only case study site with a culturally diverse group of children and staff members that feel they do not have to follow the NCF.
- FS1 is an urban, private, Christian-based ELP that is yet to be registered. It operates formally like a school. Approximately 135 children are enrolled and there are six classes managed by nine staff members (3-12 months; 1-2 years; 2-3 years; 3-4 years; 4-5 years; Grade R). All classes have a practitioner, with some having teacher assistants as well. The child/practitioner ratio is satisfactory in all classes. Policies, governance and financial controls and planning are in place. The monthly fee is R2170 (the highest band).
- The site is tidy and quiet, with an adequate building and furnishings. There are water tanks, jungle gyms, a library, a tuck shop and ample outdoor space. Security cameras are within the site, and the gate has access control. First aid kits and fire extinguishers are visible and easily accessible. The classrooms are north-facing, with big windows and adequate learning support materials. The environment is adapted to suit a child's needs: toilets and wash basins for each age group vary according to children's height, and each classroom has a kitchen with child-friendly eating utensils. The baby class practitioner has an assistant. Babies' blankets are washed regularly, and each child has his mattress and blanket.

Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and Other Curricula

FS1 does not use the NCF but rather adopts a Bible-based programme from the United States, aligned with most ELDA's. The programme covers cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. The principal said it is unnecessary to change to the NCF when the staff are satisfied with what they are doing. During the interviews, however, some staff and parents pointed out that most of the children are from non-western cultures and that the curriculum does not include elements from their cultures, which would help them to feel more at home. The principal does not, for instance, think that playing indigenous games in the ELP is necessary because, she said, times have changed and children could learn those things at home.

The daily plan is displayed on the wall in each class. The practitioners strongly agree with the concepts of child agency and play-based learning. Activity planning is thematic (e.g. animals, fairy tales, Christmas, dinosaurs). The children at this ELP explore age-appropriate STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Maths) through play activities like block building, sand pouring, drawing, and play dough, and all classes start the day with a Bible-themed activity. The medium of instruction is English, the home language of about half the children. Speaking other languages

during class is frowned upon. Teachers and other children support those who understand English through repetition and gestures.

FS1 has no working relationship with the Department of Basic Education. The principal received a digital copy of the NCF from DBE but intends to continue with their current curriculum, as in her view, they have a well-presented Christian curriculum at a level of the NCF, if not higher.

Theme 2: Quality of Practitioners and Learning Environment

There are limited internal support processes for staff, including meetings with individual practitioners, discussions on practice, Wi-Fi and books for reference purposes, and posters and curriculum materials to support their work. The principal has an ECD Diploma. One of the two practitioners interviewed has a UNISA Grade R certificate, and they have one- and two years of experience, respectively. Staff do online courses, and there is career progression planning, although there is dissatisfaction with the hours and salaries. All staff appear friendly, calm and gentle, which is management's main recruitment criterion. One of the practitioners is worried about the decline in the respect shown by learners in her class over the years, and she also reports disunity among the staff. These uneasy feelings stem from a mismatch in culturally-based expectations and beliefs.

Theme 3: Parental Engagement and Access to Auxiliary Services

Weekly communication with parents via WhatsApp messages, videos, and written reports are provided. Parents are invited to meetings and concerts, and some parents ask for ideas on how to support learning at home. Menus and academic programmes are emailed to parents.

Staff wished for more parental support with fundraising. Many parents work, and there is limited participation in meetings and support with fundraising. There is a parent's advisory committee, and three-quarters of parents pay fees regularly. Some parents and students from a nearby college are teacher assistants. Notably, there is no policy for reporting suspected child abuse, and staff do not have child protection clearance. Occupational therapy students from the local university screen the children as part of their practicum and make referrals. The principal reported on one case of a referral to a social worker.

Staff members address each other and parents formally, and informal talk with parents is deemed unprofessional, as they are then privy to the child's home circumstances. This means that the centre is detached from the available resources of the surrounding community, and it is hard for them to be sensitive to community factors that may impact the children in their care. Curriculum development and the integrated referral services of the centre also need attention in terms of inclusivity and alignment to broader national goals for ECD in South Africa.

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

This ELP only has links to private, not government, resources. They do not have any connections with ECD NGOs, but the school does belong to the South African Childcare Association. Staff

mention having internal support and training opportunities; they do online courses through the US organisation whose curriculum they use. However, they do not mention external support.

Theme 5: Outcome, Centre and Child

Most of the children achieve the standard for ELOM except for in the case of the Fine Motor skills. The home-learning interviews were conducted with both mothers and fathers of the children, and the number of children in the household ranged from one to four. In total, 75% of the parents have tertiary education. In the past week at the time of the interview, 75% of the parents read to the children, sang or told stories, and all took their children outside.

The high-quality premises, resources and overall teaching programme has resulted in impressive ELOM scores. Nevertheless, interviews and observations reveal gaps in the management of staff and parent expectations regarding respect for religious, ethnic and language diversity. The staff are gentle people who love children and are determined to educate them well, but underneath the polite façade, there is tension. Most teaching staff do not have ECD qualifications or opportunities to attend workshops. FS1 has not received compliance checking from relevant departments.

Free State 2

Free State 2 (FS 2) High-Performing Site

- The average ELOM score is 71, the average Learning Environment Checklist score is 30 and the ELP scores 7.5 for the Curriculum scale.
- FS2 is a registered township ELP with four practitioners, a principal, and 54 children. There are brick classrooms for the three age groups: 2-3, 2-4 and 5-6 years. The latter class shares a space with younger children. The premises are safe with good infrastructure, including piped water, sufficient child-friendly flushing toilets, and access to electricity and gas. The yard is pleasant-looking, with trees and a well-fenced vegetable garden. There are adequate materials indoors and outside for the older children (although not for the babies and toddlers), and the children enjoy well-balanced meals daily. There is an ECD-experienced principal, three practitioners, a cook and a groundsman.

Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and Other Curricula

FS2 has qualified teachers and follows a well-planned daily programme for the 3-4 year old and 4-5 year old classes, using the NCF as a curriculum and the Ntataise materials. The Ntataise manuals and programme organisers are NCF-aligned. While the manual outlines what should be covered, the practitioners use the departmental templates to plan activities. The practitioners could give practical examples of how the activities relate to the full spectrum of ELDA. In general,

there is a strong focus on developing social, emotional and life skills, which is done through free-choice activities. They take account of individual differences in learning and use careful observations and assessments to guide them in assisting individual children. They extensively utilise play-based learning and child agency in self-directing learning, but the staff also recognise the importance of control and support. They try not to limit children but encourage them to feel competent and confident.

Theme 2: Quality of Practitioners and Learning Environment

The practitioners for 3-4 and 4-5 year olds have ECD NQF Level 4 qualifications and training at the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college on the NCF. The principal also has an NQF Level 4 qualification, and there is a trained first aider on the staff. The two practitioners for the baby and toddler classes are the least trained. Regular staff meetings, contracts, job descriptions and development plans were reported to be in place.

The principal and teaching staff plan lessons jointly, and the experienced staff assist new staff. The principal stresses the need for planning so that practitioners can assemble the necessary materials and she is able to review plans and assist where necessary. They recognise the role of the layout and materials as an essential part of the programme. *"The classrooms should speak to a child even when a teacher is not talking"*. The principal mentions print-rich displays in enabling children to learn about letters independently.

The primary barrier to NCF implementation is the need for more space, which necessitates the toddlers sharing with the babies and limits the activities for both age groups.

Sesotho is the LOLT and even a few foreign children speak it. Indigenous games are played daily, and they have cultural days where the children are introduced to other cultures, such as the culture in Pakistan because there are local businesses run by Pakistanis. Stories are told and songs are sung in the traditional SeSotho manner.

The principal and all practitioners refer to their love of children as the driving force for their work. However, both senior practitioners have many years of ECD experience (34 and 11 years respectively), but their salaries are low and often paid late. DSD had instructed them to stay open during the holidays, causing further stress and tiredness. *"One thing that prevents teaching from being effective is that we don't pay enough, but we demand so many things. (Supporting NGO)."*

Children with disabilities are accepted, but the principal says they do not know how to assist adequately even though they have had some training. If a practitioner finds that a child is showing no progress, she reports it to the principal, who contacts the parents, as the situation needs to be handled with sensitivity. If necessary, they refer to the relevant health service, but there are difficulties in getting children properly identified and supported.

Theme 3: Parental Engagement and Access to Auxiliary Services

The social and emotional climate is warm and child-centred, and the relationships between the teaching staff, the management committee and the parents are positive. The ELP's good reputation has been spread by word of mouth from parents. When parents are called to help, those who are not at work help where they can. The parents appreciate the love and care given to the children. They see the practitioners as grandmothers who have traditional ways of raising children, allowing them to play but giving them a spiritual and religious education. The principal says that parents and the ELP should be in partnership as influencers of the child's development, and parents are encouraged to visit the school and check the child's work at home. The SGB committee discusses new proposals with parents, ensuring the inclusion and support of the parents in the centre's running.

Nurses visit monthly to check the children's health, including periodic deworming. The parents of children without birth certificates are referred to the Home Affairs office. On the negative side, appeals to the municipality for the adjacent open plot to be a playground and to assist with fencing has failed. There often need to be water or sewerage services. The community has high levels of theft, and the centre has suffered losses, including groceries.

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

FS2 reports regular programme support from Ntataise. Internal support is provided by the principal, who observes and provides feedback. Staff meetings allow practitioners to reflect on how the programme is going. They have an active, committed and hands-on governing body. The centre has books, curriculum guides and the NCF available to help with programme planning. The practitioners attend workshops to support their development in the areas of health, first aid and special needs. However, the principal wishes she had additional funding to upgrade staff qualifications.

Theme 5: Outcome, Centre and Child

The children assessed are achieving the standards for all of the domains. The home learning interviews were 50% of grandmothers and 50% of mothers with household sizes ranging from one or five children. In total, 75% of caregivers have a post-school qualification. All caregivers/parents indicate that they read books, told stories, sang to the children and took them outside in the past week during the time of the interview.

As with the other high-performing ELPs, FS2 has a disciplined approach to providing a good quality early education (although not for babies and toddlers), well-managed finances, and they include parents in all processes. They are in need of more funding and increased safety measures in a crime-ridden environment. The ELP diverges from others in that they encourage children to explore cultural beliefs and practices from other parts of the world.

KwaZulu Natal 1

Kwazulu Natal 1 (KZN 1) High-Performing Site

- KZN1 showcases a high average ELOM score of 66.67. Fee bands, rural location, curriculum, and checklist scores closely resemble those of KZN2.
- KZN1, one of the five high-performing schools, is strategically paired with KZN2, an underperforming preschool, for comparison purposes.
- Although this is a rural school, children are brought in by their parents from other areas because it has a good reputation. This registered ELP has two play areas with swings, slides and a jungle gym inside the yard. The school premises are fenced, with security cameras and a gate that can be locked. Rainwater tanks are used as the main water source, but teachers sometimes have to fetch water from the river. The centre uses electricity for lighting and kitchen appliances. They use a gas stove for cooking. There is a food garden.
- According to the 2022 Baseline Audit, 124 children are registered at the site. There are 11 practitioners. Children are assigned to classes on an age cohort basis. The school is clean and neat and has six classrooms, bathrooms and a kitchen. The classrooms are arranged to allow children to access toys conveniently. Children sit on a mat, and toys are placed in different play areas around the classroom.

Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and Other Curricula

This ELP is working in an exemplary fashion in terms of the quality of teaching and learning taking place there. Their approach is holistic, mainly play-based and age-appropriate, and in line with the pedagogical methods proposed in the NCF, covering all the NCF ELDAs.

The themes for the daily programmes use the provincial DBE planning templates, and the staff for each age cohort meet every fortnight to plan their programmes. The plans are submitted to the principal for approval, and she monitors the implementation and assists where necessary. The centre does enrol children with disabilities. Staff are dissatisfied with the lack of special schools for serious cases, and would like more training on inclusive education in general. The teachers use isiZulu when they teach, and all the children speak isiZulu.

Theme 2: Quality of Practitioners and Learning Environment

The principal is a retired high school teacher, and all teaching staff have level 5 diplomas. They are trained on the NCF and have a staff skills development plan. All teaching staff have contracts and frequent performance appraisals. The district DBE uses the ELP as a centre of excellence and runs workshops for staff from other centres at this venue. Staff attend district workshops and forum meetings to supplement their training and introduce them to new ideas. Members of the SGB are also very capable of managing the site and have business and fundraising experience. The SGB organises and oversees the centre's finances, liaises with parents and staff, and arrange outings for the children.

All staff speak of their pleasure in working with children, and they value the friendly and cooperative attitude between staff members. In their kind attitude towards the children, they are good role models for the children in a society characterised by violence in schools. They have a "can do" attitude in the face of the difficulty of providing a high-quality ECD facility in a very poor area. Many parents are unable to afford fees consistently and the grants are inadequate and often paid late, which makes it difficult to meet the financial commitments of the organisation.

Theme 3: Parental Engagement and Access to Auxiliary Services

Communication with parents is frequent and varied, and is highly appreciated by the parents. An example of their caring approach is that the baby classroom has a quiet place for lactating mothers to feed their babies before setting off to work. There are monthly formal progress reports and meetings with the SGB four times a year where parents can express their concerns, staff can explain teaching methods, and they can discuss child-rearing practices. The parents note that their children are not only well cared for but enjoy going to the ELP. They report being confident, well-spoken and well-informed as a result of the learning programme. The parents would like to see their children being taught technology and the English language. They would also like an occasional day of cultural dancing.

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

The ELP receives regular support and training from the DBE and an NGO. They are members of the local ECD forum, and the DBE organises peer support through cluster meetings. A social worker comes to monitor the welfare of the children, and the centre staff have been introduced to the local library. The municipality has provided land and buildings to the centre, and they have a good working relationship with the municipal clinics and social workers, which provide health and social services to the children there. Within the centre, the principal oversees the quality of the planning and classroom activities of the practitioners, and gives practitioners advice and additional training.

Theme 5: Outcome, Centre and Child

Most of the children are achieving the standards for all of the developmental domains. The home learning interviews were conducted with mothers and fathers. All households have three children, and in the past week at the time of the interview, only 33% indicated that they told stories, read books or sang to the children, with 66% indicating they took the child outside to play.

It is apparent that the leadership provided by the principal is seen as pivotal. Her interactions with staff, parents and community members are widely praised, and all portray her as a woman of considerable energy and competence, and a real asset to the popularity and continuity of the centre. She has gathered around her similarly committed practitioners and SGB members, and both the parents and the researcher note the happy attitude of the children. The limitations of this centre are poor staff remuneration and funding, which causes great personal distress to staff.

Kwazulu Natal 2

Kwazulu Natal 2 (KZN 2) Low-Performing Site

- The average ELOM score is very low at 26.61, but on other measures, the two KZN sites are similar: the fee band for both sites is R111-290, the Curriculum score is 14, and the Learning Environment Checklist score is 39.
- KZN2 is in a rural area and not registered. The building is an old courthouse, which is still used for occasional meetings of traditional leaders. The centre uses tents on the grounds on meeting days. There are two classes with 21 and 30 children, respectively. There is an outdoor play area with a slide, jungle gym and swings, a sand pit, and an outdoor tank repurposed into a playhouse. The centre uses both tap and rainwater as sources of water. They use electricity for lighting and refrigeration and gas for cooking. The ELP has a food garden that does not look well cared for.

Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and Other Curricula

The principal claims to be familiar with NCF and uses it to plan activities. Their priority is to holistically, physically, mentally, and socially develop the children at the site. The practitioners receive cluster training from the DBE and follow the themes used to organise the curriculum. There is a high staff turnover, so some practitioners have little experience with the NCF and need more training. The NGO support worker mentions a very attractive fantasy play area and says that staff align activities to the ELDA's well. However, it needed to be clarified from the staff interviews the extent to which the NCF training is being practised. There is some understanding that children learn through play, but the concept of children being able to choose what they play could have been better understood. The importance of teaching respect and politeness is emphasised several times by practitioners and SGB members, and at least one of the practitioners misunderstands the concept of child agency. They do not have any special needs children at present but are open to caring and inclusive attitudes towards children with special needs.

Theme 2: Quality of Practitioners and Learning Environment

The principal and staff have less than Grade 12 education, but the principal has had ECD training and has a diploma. She takes sole responsibility for the administration, including all documents and files. The level of organisation at the ELP was poor during the research observation period. The principal was difficult to contact, and the interview with her was rearranged several times. The practitioners assisted in arranging the parents' focus group discussion. The SGB has split over disagreements about funding. However, all members interviewed indicate their commitment to helping the centre, although none are experienced in committee work.

On both observation days, the gates were opened at 6 a.m. by neighbours. The practitioners only start arriving after the learners walk unattended to their classrooms. Practitioners were told to stop working from the beginning of the month because they could not be paid, but they still came to work. The practitioners are friendly and can be described as gentle and patient with the

children. They are unhappy about their working conditions and uncertain about their future employment. The principal said disagreements often happened, but jokes help relieve the tension.

Theme 3: Parental Engagement and Access to Auxiliary Services

KZN2 does not appear to be making the necessary efforts to communicate and collaborate with parents. There have not been any parent meetings for over a year, and parents are not involved in supporting the centre. The social worker thought that the principal is very family-oriented and followed up on children in families with serious financial problems. The practitioners send referral forms to parents whose children had problems, and local clinics are on hand for child health problems.

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

The ELP was started by members of the SGB, who are community leaders, and the Chief supplies children in need with clothing, especially in winter. The centre is supported by a welfare NGO and a social worker, and practitioners attend the DBE cluster training every month. The principal notes that they are also members of a Crèche Association and the ECD forum. They work collaboratively with the primary school next door in placing children who are ready for the next grade.

They are closely linked to municipal services. The health inspectors visit to update them on changes to the bylaws. They are supported by the clinics, social workers and Home Affairs. The practitioners use the municipal library to develop their skills using books on child development.

Theme 5: Outcome, Centre and Child

The children in this ECD are falling far behind in all developmental areas except for the fine motor skills. The home learning survey was only conducted with two mothers with no tertiary education with between one and three children in the household. All indicated that they sang, told stories or read to the children in the past week at the time of the interview, with only one indicating they took the child outside to play.

Both KZN1 and KZN2 operate in low-income areas and suffer from funding constraints. KZN1, however, had an advantage over KZN2 in that it was established by a more experienced principal and SGB many years ago. In KZN2, on the other hand, the principal and some practitioners are relatively new arrivals and do not have the depth of experience and training found in KZN1. The centre is noticeably disorganised. The staff concentrate more on the social welfare of the children at the expense of high-quality education.

Limpopo 1

Limpopo 1 (L1) High-Performing Site

- The Fee band is R111-290, there is an ELOM score of 58.3, the Learning Programme Checklist score is 38 and Curriculum Score is 10.3. These scores are higher than other ELPs in this area.
- L1 is an NPO founded in 2004 by the current principal. It is fully registered and subsidised, and operates for 10 hours a day. It is located in a rural municipality with 46 children, two mixed classes, a principal, two practitioners and a cook. It is well-fenced and has a spacious, neat yard with a lawn, outdoor equipment, trees, a vegetable garden, brick-and-mortar buildings, and a big deck. All meals are provided, but there are occasional water shortages. The yard is fenced and secure, but the kitchen poses a safety hazard because it is not sealed off from children. There are three toilets, all without doors. One staff member is trained in first aid.

Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and Other Curricula

L1 staff are familiar with the NCF and refer to the daily routine. Many activities are done outdoors, partly because of the hot climate in Limpopo, which predominantly include gross motor and social free-play activities. Although there is an older (3-5 years) and younger (0-3 years) group, there is more age differentiation in the teaching. Nevertheless, staff find it challenging to plan an age-appropriate activity for all ages in the class. They start more formal work at four years, teaching the children to hold a pen and draw, for example, ears and eyes, but not letters of the alphabet. The provincial education department sent them copies of the NCF by phone, but there is nowhere for them to print it out.

The programme emphasises safety, nutrition, fine and gross motor development, religious instruction and self-care skills for the younger group. All ages are encouraged to be confident in speaking and singing. The practitioners understand the integration of activities and how they contribute not only to cognitive development but also to the expression of emotions.

The centre prides itself on developing vernacular and including traditional content. No formal language policy exists, but all local languages are spoken and embraced. They use indigenous games, and the children sing songs in Sepedi, Tsonga, Sotho, or English. They "*do the praise of the Qhamaqu in the Sepedi language.*" Children with disabilities are accepted, and staff report how currently enrolled children have improved in class.

Theme 2: Quality of Practitioners and Learning Environment

Staff have contracts, performance appraisals and development plans. There are regular staff meetings and an opportunity to reflect on their practice. The teacher of the 4-5 year olds and principal have NQF1, 4 and 5, and the younger group teacher has Level 1. The principal observes

performance and gives feedback monthly. The older group teacher attends workshops and skills programmes, including training on the Road to Health booklet. Books, the curriculum (from Ntataise) and posters are available to help with planning and preparation. There is a planning process in which the practitioners sit with the principal and draft an overall plan, followed by a daily plan. They note the importance of reviewing how the programme went and following up with any child who had difficulty with it.

The principal and practitioners understand the value of children making their own decisions, exploring things for themselves, and learning through play, which is the guiding ethos of the programme. They use several different playful strategies for making learning fun.

The overcrowding due to lack of classroom space is unpleasant, and staff remuneration needs to be higher. The staff have contracts and job descriptions and a supportive and cooperative work environment, but the SGB member finds the lack of financial stability for the staff worrying. They feel they need two additional teachers to run the programme according to the NCF plan. Staff have limited opportunity for leave, taking leave in December and June when schools close, although the DSD has told them to keep the centre open. They have difficulty purchasing supplies like stationery and need extra classrooms. The underlying problem is funding; the funding brought in by the school fees should be increased to run the centre properly.

Theme 3: Parental Engagement and Access to Auxiliary Services

The parents bring children to them firstly, because they are good teachers and the children develop fast. The children are safe, and the teachers are loving. The SGB member talks about the humanity of the staff. Some children from impoverished families cannot pay fees but can still be enrolled.

Parents typically receive informal daily reports when they fetch their child, written reports once a week and sometimes WhatsApp messages or notes in the child's bag. Only some parents understand the NCF but know their children are now more independent, confident and expressive. They are being taught to draw and write, and they know something about numbers and modes of transport. Some parents understand that children learn through play but say there is also a time for routine and teaching. Children are greeted at the gate and respond happily to the welcoming atmosphere. The parents remark that the children enjoy being at the centre. Parents have noticed that the practitioners are very patient with children, and a parent mentions that one practitioner has advised her against shouting at her child to achieve good behaviour.

Communication on sensitive issues is part of the SGB's role. For example, they contact parents over non-payment of fees and arrange meetings to discuss this. Another sensitive issue concerns developmental delays because some parents do not want to accept this. The parents, too, can raise their concerns during meetings hosted by the SGB. Relationships with parents are respectful and professional, and parents appreciate this.

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

The centre receives support from the local community with the food garden, donations and safety monitoring. The health department comes and checks the safety of the premises, and a social worker comes to monitor. Another organisation assists with the development of their mission and vision statements and their strategic planning. In addition, the DSD and DBE also offer material support in the form of buildings and toys.

The staff identify services that would benefit the children through their membership to the ECD forum. The centre has a solid link to general community advocacy concerning issues related to women and children, and reports incidents of abuse.

Theme 5: Outcome, Centre and Child

The children are achieving the standards in this ECD except for cognition and executive functioning. The home learning interviews were conducted with mothers and one aunt, with most indicating they have a post-school qualification. The size of the households ranges from one to six children. Only 20% indicated they sang to the child in the past week at the time of the interview, all took their child outside and 75% read to the child.

L1 is a case study of how consistent, uniform continuity of care from the home to the community and centre can foster a sense of well-being in young children. It also shows how the NCF can be flexibly interpreted to suit the cultural needs of a particular community and offers lessons on the importance of cultural relevance in quality. The SGB plays a significant role in terms of fundraising and obtaining resources.

Western Cape 1

Western Cape (WC1) High-Performing Site

- This ECD was selected based on the fee band of R291-750, along with a Curriculum Score of 13, ELOM score of 69.3, and a Checklist score of 37.5.
- The ECD is a registered ELP in a Cape Town township, positioned along a busy road opposite a shopping centre, resulting in a noisy environment. Housed within a former bakery building, the facility comprises partitioned classrooms. Classroom walls display both the daily programme and children's work. Various areas cater to different activities, such as a theme table, block area, book corner, and creative art space in the older group's room. The toddler classroom, designed for diverse activities like dancing and painting, is observed with children engaged in storytime.

Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and Other Curricula

Aligned with the NCF, the teaching programme utilises The Unlimited Child programme by Sokhela Sonke for practitioner training. The 6 month to 2 year old group's daily schedule covers

a range of ELDAs, rhymes for language encouragement, puzzles, sorting tasks, and educational toys. The practitioners facilitate morning snacks, meals, and nap times, utilising ample resources creatively. Positive changes in children's behaviour, language skills, and aggression reduction are reported by parents.

Weekly planning and post-week review processes allow practitioners to follow play-based learning, accommodating diverse learning styles and personalities. Operating mainly in isiXhosa, with English as a popular choice, the centre embraces inclusion, currently accommodating children with disabilities. Effective observation techniques inform tailored approaches to support children with disabilities.

Theme 2: Quality of Practitioners and Learning Environment

The principal effectively responds to practitioner's requests for daily programme assistance, guiding children through it to demonstrate effective execution. Yearly qualification training plans for staff are coordinated to ensure continuous development. Workshops such as Lego's Six Bricks and child safety are attended to enhance skills. Strong teamwork prevails, fostering mutual assistance and motivation. The principal's supportive and respectful approach is praised.

Despite financial constraints, the centre promotes transparency in expenditure, sharing information with staff. When finances worsen, SGB organises meetings for fundraising. The principal's leadership and engagement in improving the ELP's standards is acknowledged.

Theme 3: Parental Engagement and Access to Auxiliary Services

The centre encourages active parental involvement, positioning parents as home teachers. Parent visits are welcomed, and staff accessibility is appreciated. Weekly homework assignments engage parents in children's development. The site's reputation for child care and child protection resonates with the community, especially in the context of high crime rates involving children. Effective communication includes parent meetings, SMS, phone calls, and written reports. Active parental involvement is seen in SGB membership, attendance at events, and assistance with gardening and maintenance. A robust policy addresses parental difficulties and referrals, contributing to successful health services and child support grant referrals.

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

The principal's commitment is evident in joining forums, registering as a preschool, and networking with local educators. Support is garnered from libraries, police, traffic officers, and local schools. The centre's internal controls include the principal's oversight of menus, cleanliness, and training organisations' fortnightly monitoring. Beneficial outcomes are reported in both skills enhancement and administrative management.

Theme 5: Outcome, Centre and Child

Out of all the development domains, half of the children in this ECD are achieving standards and the other half are falling far behind for fine motor skills. The home learning survey was rolled out to mothers of the children in this ELP, with all having post-school training and the number of children in the household ranges from one to two. In both interviews, the mothers indicate that stories were read in the past week at the time of the interview; they sang with the children and took them outside.

WC1 emerges as a haven of cheerful, development-focused learning, where parents are actively engaged. Noteworthy emphasis on practitioner skills improvement, planning, and developmental assessment is a hallmark. In an environment marred by child violence, the centre's role as a secure refuge is significant. The principal's strategy of selecting experienced, child-loving staff stands commendable, especially in the face of underfunding.

Western Cape 2

Western Cape (WC2) Low-Performing Site

- WC2 is paired with WC1 and represents an underperforming centre within a similar fee band and area. WC2 is selected based on its low curriculum scores of 7.5, a checklist score of 32, and a low ELOM score of 33.92.
- WC2 stands as a brick-built centre accommodating 84 children, positioned alongside the founder and principal's residence in a Cape Town township. The centre operates as a registered non-profit and fully registered ELP, and receives a subsidy from DBE. Infrastructure includes mains electricity, cooking gas, piped water, handwashing stations, child-friendly flush toilets, and potties. Adequate first aid and fire safety measures are in place, with a separate kitchen. The outdoor space is uneven, stony, and contains a potentially unsafe staircase, necessitating weekly trips to a nearby park for children to play. The centre encompasses three classes: 0-2, 3-4, and a Grade R class. While older classes boast varied equipment, the 0-2 class is inadequately equipped, lacking interest areas or equipment.

Theme 1: Implementation of NCF and Other Curricula

Initial reports suggest alignment with the NCF, staff training, and comprehensive coverage of ELDA's. However, during the researcher's visit, different insights emerge. The principal reveals that activities are influenced by The Unlimited Child programme, with lower age groups not adhering to NCF themes due to lack of training. In particular, the curriculum is not followed during periods of minimal enrollment. Temporary staff shortages cause consolidation of all children in the 0-2 class. The principal oversees the Grade R class. Notably, the well-equipped Grade R and pre-Grade R classes do not extend to the toddler classroom. Current enrollment includes children with special needs, resulting in some inclusion training. Communication predominantly occurs in Xhosa, with assistance provided to non-speakers.

Theme 2: Quality of Practitioners and Learning Environment

The Grade R teacher possesses a Level 5 qualification, while the others' qualifications are unclear. However, all staff, with 4 to 15 years of experience, maintain proper governance and administrative protocols. Contracts, job descriptions, and development plans are in place. Regular staff meetings facilitate reflection on programme execution. Grade R and ages 3-4 teachers receive salaries within the R4000-4449 range. Concerns arise regarding teaching practices for younger groups, indicating a lack of understanding of child agency and play-based learning importance for this age group. In response to high crime rates, the centre maintains locked gates for all except parents.

Theme 3: Parental Engagement and Access to Auxiliary Services

Monthly parent meetings and social media are methods used to maintain parent contact. Quarterly progress feedback and reports are provided. Parents communicate with staff during pickups, but deeper engagement is desired. Parent education activities are absent, and challenges with making fee payments emerged post-COVID. Community engagement includes birth registration referrals, participation in Philippi ECD Forum, and support from a local NGO.

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

Professional support involves principal and NGO supervision, alongside periodic external assessments from DSD, DBE, and the municipality. The principal receives diverse training workshops. Staff access the curriculum, posters, and engage in performance reflection during meetings.

Theme 5: Outcome, Centre and Child

For both gross and fine motor skills, half of the children are achieving the required standards. However, for the rest of the development domains the children are falling behind or far behind. No home learning surveys were rolled out with this ELP because the parents could not be contacted.

WC2's focus is on Grade R under the well-trained principal's guidance. However, systematic oversight of other practitioners and interest in modern pedagogical methods are lacking. Limited parent participation and infrequent outdoor play is observed. When comparing WC1 and WC2 in similarly challenging environments, their child development outcomes (i.e ELOM) differ significantly. WC1 emphasises training and parental involvement, while WC2's management falls short in these aspects.

Appendix 2: Research Questions by Theme

The study has 17 research questions which fall under five broad themes. These sub-aims, themes and research questions are weighted equally in terms of their importance, although the amount and depth of data collected for each theme will differ.

Figure 32. Research Questions by Theme

Theme 1: Implementation of the NCF and other curricula

1. To what extent is the NCF, or similar recognised curricula for early learning, implemented in the ECD programmes on a daily basis?
2. The ECD Census and Thrive by Five data suggest that the attitudes of practitioners and principals towards child agency in learning and play tend to value practitioner agency over child agency. How do practitioners view children's agency in their own learning and how does this affect their implementation of the curriculum?
3. What are the barriers or enablers to the implementation of the NCF in ELPs?
4. To what extent is curriculum implementation inclusive of children with disabilities?

Theme 2: Quality of practitioner-learner interactions and environment

5. What are the capacities (knowledge, skills, confidence) of ECD practitioners/educators that facilitate or hinder the implementation of quality early learning programming?

Theme 3: Parental engagement, and access to auxiliary services

6. What is the relationship between the ECD programmes and the families of children who participate in the programme? Do programmes actively engage with families around learning and development of their children?
7. How are parents supported to assist their children's early learning and development, particularly through play-based learning?
8. What are the existing referral pathways for primary healthcare, child protection, child welfare grants, birth registration, etc?

Theme 4: Professional Support and Monitoring

9. How do ELPs engage, collaborate with and support each other?
10. What in-service training do ECD practitioners receive to support the implementation of the NCF or other curriculum?
11. What mechanisms and processes are in place as part of the programme's management to provide guidance and mentoring to staff in the implementation of the curriculum?
12. How do ECD programmes engage with their local municipality?
13. How is the quality monitored on a regular basis and what kinds of remedial action and support is put in place when necessary? How does this take place at the following levels: ECD programme management, NGO/RTO support, DBE district / provincial, DSD

district/provincial, municipality?

Theme 5: Outcomes: Centre and Child

14. The Thrive by Five data has suggested that children across the board are struggling with the following development domains: Fine Motor, ENM, and CEF. What are the potential reasons why children are struggling in these particular domains?
15. Using data from Thrive by Five to inform sampling, what are the centre-level factors that drive PD (resilience) in child-level performance on the ELOM?
16. How does a new suite of tools used to measure quality learning through play, with a focus on adult-child interactions, currently under development by LEGO Foundation partners, contribute to our understanding of ECD quality?
17. What is the association between scores on these [quality of interaction] tools and child development outcomes (e.g. ELOM)?

Appendix 3: Logistic Regression Analysis

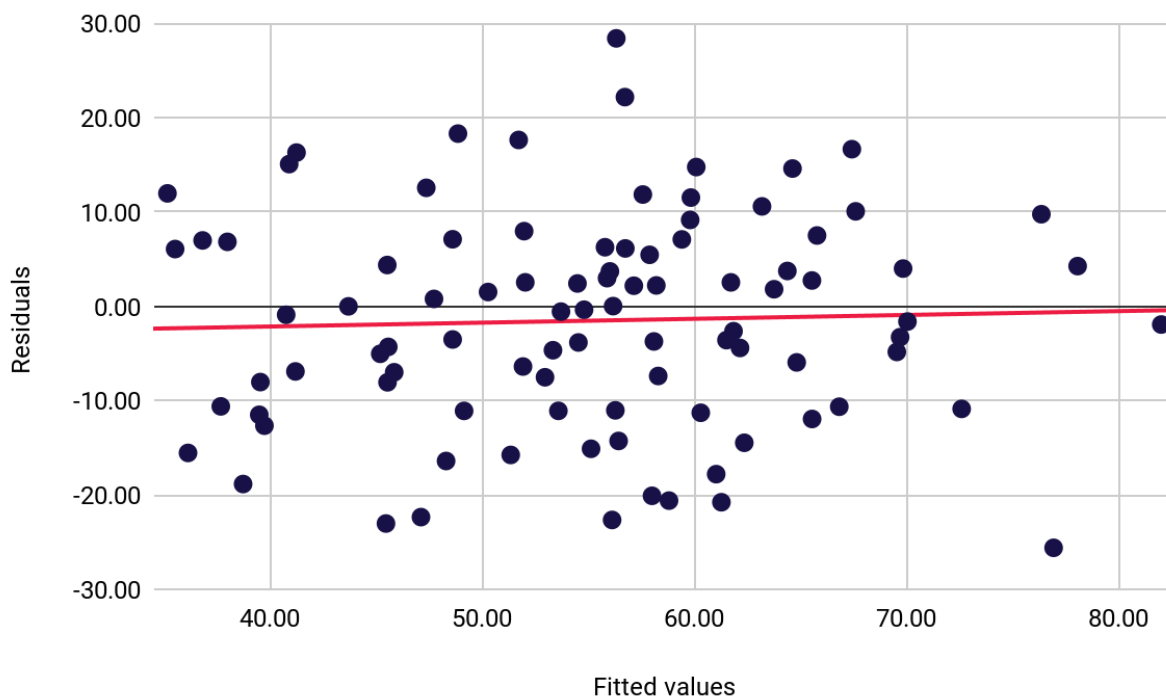
Diagnostics

This section evaluates the assumptions required for the validity and reliability of the regression models. We check for a. linearity, b. normality of residuals, c. homoscedasticity, and d. multicollinearity. The model diagnostics presented below are for the regression model where the dependent variable is Total ELOM score. We get similar results for the other regression models.

a. Linearity

The linearity assumption can be checked by inspecting the residuals vs fitted plot where the plot will show no fitted pattern if the assumption is met. The plot below shows the linearity assumption being met (see Figure 33).

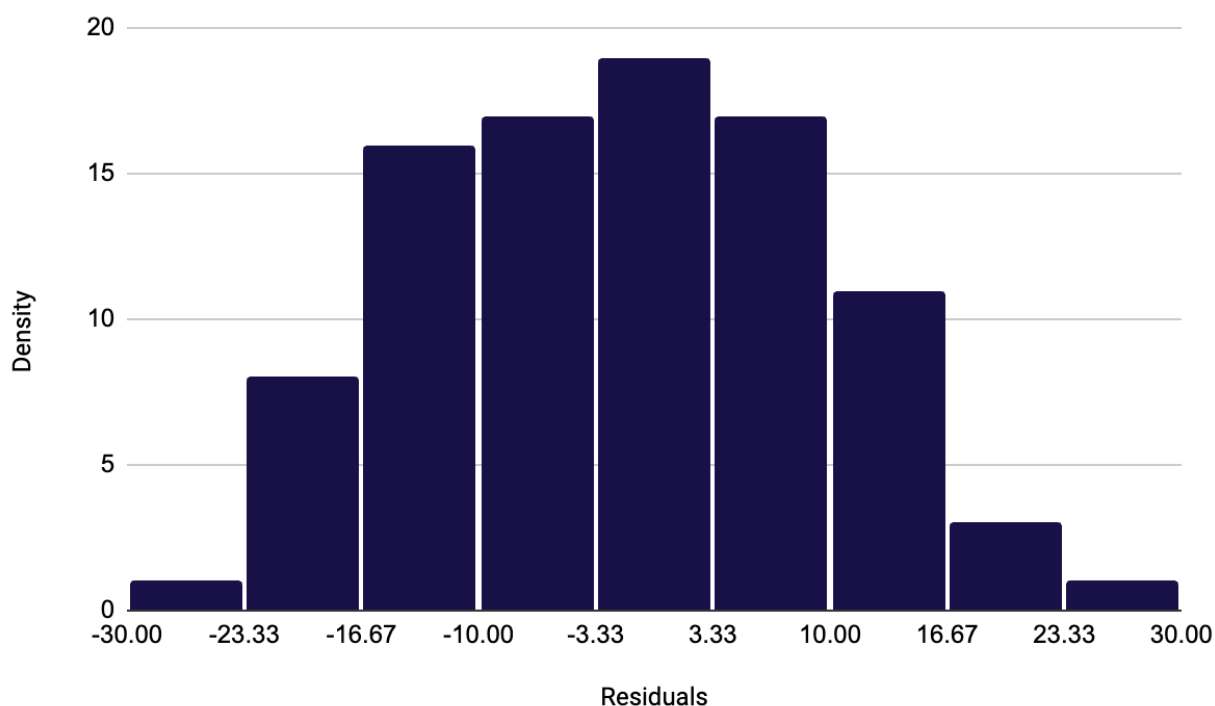
Figure 33: Linearity of the data



b. Normality of residuals

A histogram can be used to test the assumption that the model's residuals are normally distributed. The plot below shows that the model generally adheres to this assumption (see Figure 34).

Figure 34: Normality of residuals



c. Homoscedasticity

We have clustered the standard errors therefore we do not need to test the homoscedasticity assumption.

d. Multicollinearity

We estimate the model's variance inflation factor (VIF) to measure the degree of multicollinearity. As a rule of thumb, any VIF over 5 indicates severe multicollinearity. In our model the highest VIF is 3.14, suggesting multicollinearity to not be a substantial issue.

Limitations

The limitations of the regression models are listed below:

- **Lack of variability within variables:** For some of the survey questions the vast majority of responses were the same which reduces the ability for us to ascertain the relationship between those responses and ELOM scores. As an example, almost all ELPs claimed to follow the NCF but how closely they adhered to the framework is unclear.
- **Omitted variable bias:** In the above model, a potential missing variable that could lead to omitted variable bias could be "monetary value of resources available to ELP" which

captures the amount of teaching equipment, toys, and educational games the ELP has. We would expect this variable to be correlated with both ELOM scores (better educational resources lead to better ELOM scores) as well as the variable “There are big blocks (wooden or improvised)” (assuming that “big blocks” are substituted for other materials at better resourced schools).

- **Measurement error:** Errors in the measurement of the variables used in the regression limit the model’s accuracy. The mixed results coming from the PLAY tool may be due to the difficulty for fieldworkers, despite training, to reliably score the six constructs. The PLAY tools were still under development at the time of use for this study, and hadn’t yet been refined and simplified post-piloting, which could also contribute to the mixed results. In other words, the scores given by the PLAY tool may be an inaccurate reflection of the conditions in the ELPs. The other variables used in the regression may be subject to measurement error too.
- **Sample selection and size:** The sample only allows us to make generalisations about learners at Quintile 1 and Quintile 2 ELPs in the Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, and the Western Cape. A larger sample size would allow us to make more confident assertions about the relationships between ELOM scores and the variables in the regression models.

Appendix 4: Curriculum Checklist

Curriculum Subscale Tool	
Curriculum	
Inadequate	No evidence that the programme supports NCF aims.
Basic	Learning programme focuses on some of the ELDA's and is mostly developmentally appropriate (4 – 5 years).
Good	Learning programme used covers all the ELDA's and activities are developmentally appropriate catering for different children's individual needs.
Plan	
Inadequate	There is no evidence of planning used to organise learning activities (that a specific plan is being followed for the day though there may be a regular schedule).
Basic	Planning books and the playroom reflect a planned and integrated approach across different learning areas and parts of the daily programme.
Good	Plans are applied and there is evidence of taking into account children's interests and developmental appropriateness in planned activities that are implemented.
Balance	
Inadequate	Either free play or whole group activities (where children all do the same thing) predominate.
Basic	Both free play and whole group activities are provided each day and there are some small group times.
Good	There is a substantial free play indoors and outdoors, at least one story, music and ring time daily and regular small group teaching opportunities with all children are exposed at least once a week.
Numeracy	
Inadequate	Few or no appropriate maths activities, staff do not show children how to use them or participate and practitioners do not use maths words when talking to children in daily events, group times.
Basic	Some practitioners initiated and directed maths activities including number songs and rhymes linked to an intended purpose and some use of maths words in daily events and routines.
Good	Frequent number songs, rhymes, games. Children are encouraged to count objects, name shapes, sort and match. Maths learning is also integrated as part of daily routine, how many cups for dolls, plates for children, and numbers wearing red.

Literacy	
Inadequate	Few appropriate language activities. E.g. Practitioner rarely reads to children, few accessible books, little encouragement for children to talk to practitioner, no labelled pictures or print other than books, limited access to writing implements.
Basic	Some of the following language/literacy activities – daily story, some appropriate books and reading to children, access to writing implements and paper, some practitioner and child conversations and some labelled pictures and printed words displayed, especially children’s names.
Good	Daily story with active child participation and discussion (e.g. children asked to recall parts of story), access to many appropriate books and are read to regularly. Practitioner records children’s sayings, labels items in drawings, displays their emergent writing. Children encouraged to answer questions in extended way, individual adult/ child conversations and activities planned to stimulate conversation. Many labelled pictures and materials on view.
Appropriate	
Inadequate	Practitioner’s delivery of the curriculum programme is poor (e.g. not age appropriate - too easy or difficult), does not provide guidance as to how to do the task, and/or gives incorrect information.
Basic	Practitioner delivers the programme that is appropriate to the level of most learners, explains what is expected of the task, provides correct information in a theme based activity.
Good	Practitioner delivers the programme taking account of the needs of individual learners, provides guidance on what children are going to do, builds on and extends children’s knowledge of the theme content provided.
Play	
Inadequate	Either entirely teacher directed or free play with no balance of play based learning strategies.
Basic	Includes at least one period of free play as well as more directed whole group and small group activities.
Good	Has at least one substantial period of free play (45 minutes plus) in which practitioner interacts to extend learning as well as more directed by playful small and whole group activities.