

DataDrive2030

Policy Brief



Improving the quality of teaching and learning in South African early learning programmes, at scale

OCTOBER 2022

INTRODUCTION

In April 2022, responsibility for early childhood development (ECD) services was transferred from the National Department of Social Development to the National Department of Basic Education (DBE). One of the key responsibilities of the DBE is to ensure that children have access to quality early learning opportunities prior to Grade R, the first year of primary school education. This is particularly important for children from poorer households as research from around the world shows that socio-economic status is a strong predictor of school readiness and later performance. Access to high quality early learning programmes (ELPs) can help to close the learning gap for the poorest children.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 is to “*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*” Target 4.2 speaks to early learning: “*By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.*”

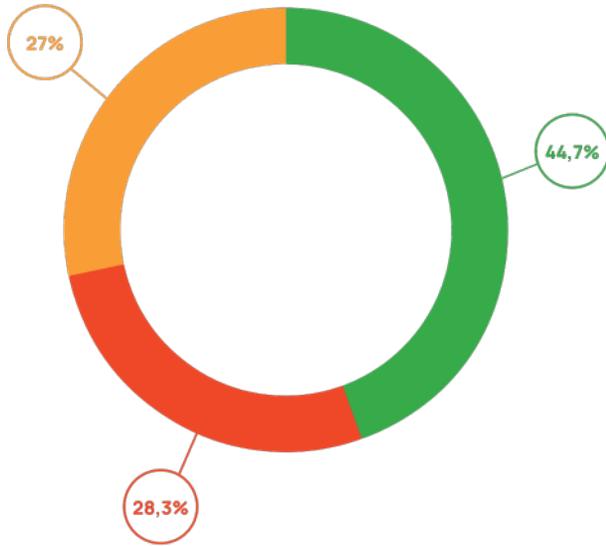
The recent Thrive by Five Index 2021,¹ which is a national survey of early learning outcomes, found that only 45% of children aged 50-59 months attending ELPs were *on track* for development in areas associated with readiness to learn in Grade R.

The study found stark differences in learning outcomes between children from poorer and wealthier backgrounds. Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely than their better-off counterparts to have the right learning foundations in place when they commence school. While 8 out of 10 children in ‘high fee’ ELPs (charging more than R1,750 per month) were found to be developmentally on track when it comes to early learning, only 3 out of 10 children from ‘low fee’ ELPs achieved the expected learning standards for their age.²

The performance gap in South African children is likely to remain evident throughout their school years,³ ultimately affecting children’s chances of participating in further education, training, and the labour market.

Provision of quality early learning opportunities has huge potential to improve trajectories through school and ultimately adult life chances. While much of the evidence⁴ is from studies of intensive and expensive programmes such as the Abecedarian and Perry Preschool programmes, evidence of the effectiveness of programmes to change the trajectories of low-income children in particular is emerging from South Africa and other low-and-middle-income countries such as Indonesia.⁵

The percentage children enrolled in ELPs who are on track, falling behind and falling far behind in early learning



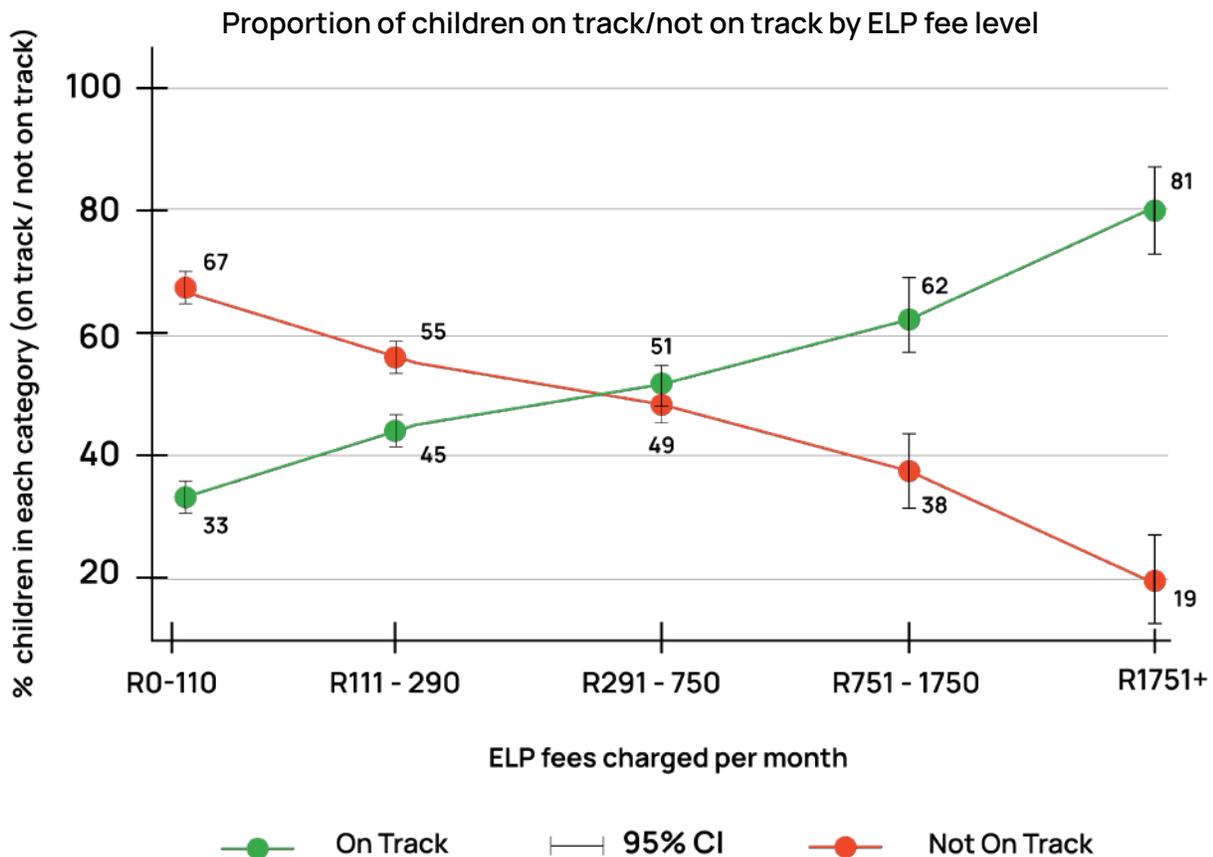
44.7% of children attending ELPs are *on track* overall for learning and are able to do the tasks expected of children their age

27% are *falling behind* and will need support to help them catch up

28.3% are *falling far behind* and will need intensive intervention

South African studies targeting poor children show that ELPs in the non-profit sector can play an important role in enabling all children's readiness to learn in the Foundation Phase of school.^{6,7} However, this is highly dependent on the quality of teaching and learning, which is often inadequate. Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, who pay the

lowest fees, usually attend programmes of lowest quality.⁸ Improving access to quality early learning programmes must be our overall goal if we are to increase the proportion of children who are developmentally *on track* when they enter the Foundation Phase of schooling.



QUESTIONS OF QUALITY

In the Draft Quality Assurance and Support System (QASS), (p.9)⁹ the authors note two broad categories of early learning programme quality variables that must be considered in any quality assurance system and in efforts to scale up the quality of provision:

1. **Structural quality variables** include the “norms and standards that, if met, secure a basic healthy, safe and enabling learning environment for young children. They pertain primarily to the infrastructure and inputs in an early learning environment and include the physical setting, teacher child ratios, group size, learning materials, health and nutrition.”

2. **Process quality variables** include classroom interactions (teacher to child and child to child), interactions with parents, pedagogical approaches such as rich literacy experiences and developmentally supportive play, and following the curriculum to promote school readiness with clear learning goals.” It is relationships between children and their practitioners and between children themselves (occurring in the context of an age appropriate play-based curriculum) that play a key role in promoting children’s well-being and their early learning outcomes.

Table 1: Components of Early Learning Programme Process Quality

INDICATOR	EXPLANATION
Sensitive, mediated caregiver/child interactions targeted to the needs of individual children	Warm, supportive, and encouraging relationships with practitioners facilitates the development of social and emotional skills associated with successful school transition. Planning and assessment of individual needs through regular formative assessments is required.
Continuum of different types of play	Developmentally supportive play includes play that is freely chosen by children, co-opted play where adults participate in and scaffold child-led play, adult guided play where specific materials are provided for children to explore a theme on their own and playful instruction where the practitioner plans an activity relating to a particular learning objective and children respond to it.
Balance of child-initiated activities and adult led activities	A mix of individual and peer activities and adult-led group individual, small and whole group activities are provided.
Inclusiveness: sensitivity to culture, language and ability	Practitioners and resources enable participation of all children regardless of their ethnicity, language, gender, learning or other needs.

While a lot of emphasis is often placed on structural variables, *process quality* variables have been found in research over decades in different parts of the world to have the most influence on child development outcomes.¹⁰ These are summarised in Table 1 above.

In Table 1, we stress both *developmentally supportive* and *adult-scaffolded child-led play* directed to specific learning objectives. While practitioners play the key role in these processes, we note too that more advanced children may also enhance the learning of their less competent peers. These are critical aspects of the early learning processes that occur through both practitioner guided and free play.¹¹ What is meant by these terms?

1. Developmentally supportive practitioner-led interactions refer to those that are both in tune with a child's current level of ability while guiding and challenging him/her to progress to a more advanced level of understanding or skill (i.e., scaffolding).

2. Scaffolding is a "teaching strategy that involves providing support for children's learning that is well-timed and well-matched to the situation and child, and that helps the child to be more successful than they would be without support". (pp.30-31)¹² Here, skills just above his/her level (Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development) can be mastered with guidance and encouragement from a more experienced other – practitioner or peers (as they play together).¹³ It is key to enhancing development in all areas. Scaffolding is evident when a practitioner closely observes a child's exploration and problem-solving efforts, "shows interest in what the child is attempting, sympathetically making suggestions that will extend their ideas and explorations and providing support that is contingent

on their level of understanding, that is, providing more direct support when they are struggling and standing back when they are making *good progress*". (p.86)¹⁴ It is essential to appreciate that the role of an effective practitioner in this process is not direct instruction (which produces short-term learning gains) but rather facilitation of higher-level problem-solving strategies, which have long-term benefit to the developing child.

IMPROVING PRACTITIONER SUPPORT FOR EARLY LEARNING

Continued professional development (CPD) for practitioners is key to strengthening the ECD workforce and supporting effective delivery of early childhood programmes.¹⁵ CPD programmes should include the following important elements:

1. Mentoring and Supervision: Mentoring is an ongoing individual relationship where an experienced ECD practitioner/trainer shares knowledge, experience, and advice with a less experienced person. It is supportive and picks up on where support and feedback is needed. Supervision involves regular monitoring of how a practitioner is delivering the early learning programme, with feedback and goals for improvement.

2. Practice linked to knowledge: Helping practitioners to understand the theory that informs certain classroom practices enables them to find more than one way of meeting a particular education goal.

3. Reflection and peer learning: Critical reflection prompts practitioners to consider their strengths as well as areas for improvement. This can motivate them to improve and to explore and try new activities and teaching strategies.

Peer learning is a collaborative process of sharing and discussing ideas and solutions to challenges. Sharing with peers is not stressful and provides feedback and ideas in a supportive environment.

4. Specific training focused on interaction skills: Modeling and providing opportunities for practitioners to practice and receive feedback on different strategies for interacting with children to scaffold and support further development is most effective for changing teaching behaviour.

5. Motivational management and leadership: A good working environment with seniors who encourage, incentivise and provide practical assistance, opportunities for discussion and resources to help practitioners on a process of continuous professional development.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCALING UP QUALITY INTERACTIONS IN ECD SETTINGS

We normally think of scale up as referring to increasing service access. That is correct. However, unless quality accompanies access, the goal of all children being equipped with the motor, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills needed to benefit from the Foundation Phase of school, will not be realised. Millions, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, will not be on track at the end of the preschool period and the effects will likely be evident in poor achievement throughout the school years.

Scaling up quality is a considerable challenge and undertaking professional development at scale is a complex endeavour involving educational institutions, private sector providers and government.¹⁶

Yoshikawa et al¹⁷ provide a comprehensive consideration of system-level factors that may enable or constrain scale up of ECD access and quality in low- and middle-income countries. They note that very few countries monitor aspects of *ECD process quality*. This is challenging but is critical for tracking improvement in areas known to promote early learning. And as Yoshikawa and colleagues note, “Without a focus on provider skills that matter for children’s development and learning, again a gap occurs in the larger system between training and monitoring systems on the one hand, and child outcomes on the other”.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa’s National Integrated ECD Policy commits to providing comprehensive quality age- and developmental stage-appropriate opportunities for learning for all children from birth until they enter formal school, by 2030. While a highly appropriate aspiration, this is likely to be a considerable challenge. Quality improvement has many facets. Goals must be realistic and careful thought will need to be given to the required interventions and steps toward their realisation.

A targeted approach, starting with achieving a basic level of quality in ELPs serving low income communities, is proposed in the draft QASS system. One approach to targeting might be to focus on ELPs charging monthly fees below an agreed threshold e.g. below R750 per month.

As the Thrive by Five Index findings have shown, most children, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, are not *on track* for early learning. We know that as a result, academic progress for many is likely to be poor throughout their school years.

If we are to disrupt this pattern, which costs children and the country dearly, there is merit in prioritising interventions most likely to increase the proportion of children who are developmentally *on track* when they reach Grade R.

Interventions that improve the ability of practitioners to engage in *developmentally supportive* interactions with children are most likely to drive improved learning outcomes. These should be a priority component of efforts to scale up early learning programme quality in the years ahead.

We can take away four key points from the evidence that are very relevant to scaling up quality early learning in South Africa:

1. Ongoing in-service training and support for programme staff is essential to improve the quality of services. This includes ELP leaders and practitioners.

2. Regular, supportive monitoring through a QASS would assist with consistent implementation and adherence to best practice protocols.

3. Programmes for scaling need to be based on sound evidence of what works in particular contexts. Child outcomes data are increasingly available to inform and enhance programme design and implementation.

4. Government cannot do this alone, partnerships are key. In the South African context these would include both the non-profit and private sectors, which are primarily responsible for delivering early learning programmes, and the provincial and district education departments responsible for ensuring adherence to quality standards. The diagram on the next page outlines recommended roles for key stakeholders in operationalising quality enhancement and assurance at scale.

Provincial Education Departments

Oversee the quality and delivery of ECD programmes

All provincial education departments should make budgetary provision for the establishment of posts and appointment of appropriately qualified personnel to oversee early learning programme quality assurance.

The number of posts should be determined by a suitable formula - for example, the number of education districts and the number of early childhood service providers in the province.

Appointees would play an important role in strengthening and supporting ECD personnel in education districts in collaboration with ECD training service providers as appropriate.

District Education Departments

Ensure early learning programme access and quality

Budgetary provision should be made for an appropriate number of posts for experienced staff with recognised ECD qualifications in every education district. These staff need to have the skills and capacity for quality assurance and provision of support to ECD services.

As a starting point, provincial DBEs should conduct a needs assessment to determine what critical skills are available in each district, and to identify gaps.

ECD Resource & Training Organisations

Can be engaged to enhance the quality of early learning programmes

Provinces should budget for and appoint suitably qualified individuals or organisations to provide in-service training and support to ECD programmes in every district. To facilitate this, a database of RTOs meeting appropriate quality standards should be established and maintained.

Service providers supporting children from disadvantaged communities (e.g. charging low monthly fees) should be targeted. A particular focus of training and support must be on strengthening practitioners' ability to provide developmentally supportive practitioner-led interactions characterised by scaffolding of learning.

It is essential that learning programme quality be monitored, and ECD service providers are supported to improve.

District offices should monitor ECD programme quality in service providers every five years (or alternative periods as proposed by the QASS) using valid and reliable South African tools. Learning programme quality assessments could be used to identify areas in which ECD service providers need support. The approach should be enabling and developmental, and never punitive, and involve a self-evaluation component by programme staff. Careful preparation of service providers for such exercises will be necessary.

Programmes identified as needing support must be provided with appropriate inputs; ECD Resource and Training Organisations could be suitable for this function. Reports on supervision and service provider progress should be submitted to the district office.

Results of quality assessments conducted in each district should be collated and provided to the Provincial Department for collation and reporting to the National DBE.

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