

Practitioner training, mentoring, and support in Early Learning Programme quality

Introduction

Our vision as a country is universal access¹ to high-quality Early Learning Programmes (ELPs), which have the potential to significantly improve child outcomes especially for the poorest children. We remain far from that goal.

The 2021 Thrive by Five Index, released in 2022, found that 55,3% of children in South Africa who attend ELPs are *Falling Behind* with more than half of these children *Falling Far Behind* the expected learning standards for their age.

What aspects of ELPs affect learning outcomes?

The Thrive by Five Index confirms findings from other South African studies that the amount of time a child spends at the programme (the dosage) will influence outcomes. In short, children who attend a good quality ELP more regularly, do better.

Other aspects of ELPs that affect child outcomes are the physical setting within which learning takes place, practitioner qualifications, group size, staff-child ratios, learning materials, pedagogical approaches, and curriculum implementation.² However, the single most important factor for improved

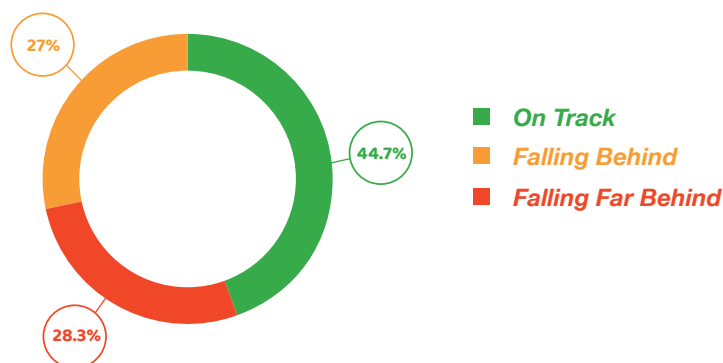
learning outcomes is the quality of engagement between practitioner and child.

High-quality ELPs are delivered by well-trained, motivated practitioners³ who:

- Establish responsive relationships with children and their caregivers⁴ by creating opportunities with individual children to connect emotionally, and truly understand the needs of the children in their care;
- Adapt their programmes to be culturally and contextually appropriate,⁵ by including songs, poems, and stories children are familiar with, and by understanding what caregivers view as important to include in the programme;
- Provide effective play-based, developmentally appropriate learning activities, by including games and toys children play with at home, and by making resources from readily available materials. These practitioners use the National Curriculum Framework as a guide when selecting learning activities to ensure that the activities are appropriate; and
- Thoroughly record and follow up on child formative assessments⁶ through weekly observations to document children's development. Areas that require strengthening should receive more attention during the subsequent weeks. Early identification and support is critically important during the early years.

Learning Total scores

More than half of 4- to 5-year-old children enrolled in ELPs in South Africa are not able to do the tasks expected of children their age, with 28.3% of children *Falling Far Behind* the expected standard.



¹Republic of South Africa. (2015). National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy. Pretoria: Government Printers.

²Biersteker, L., Dawes, A., Hendricks, L., & Tredoux, C. (2016). Center-based early childhood care and education program quality: A South African study. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 36, 334–344. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2016.01.004>.

³DFID. (2017). Evidence Brief Training of Early Childhood Development Workforce in Low-Resource Contexts. Lincoln UK: Bishop Grosseteste University.

⁴Devercelli, A. (2015). Expanding Access to Early Childhood Development: Using Interactive Audio Instruction. World Bank Group and Education Development Center. <https://www.edc.org/sites/default/files/uploads/Expanding%20Access%20to%20Early%20Childhood%20Development%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>.

⁵Sun, J., Rao, N., & Pearson, E. (2015). Policies and strategies to enhance the quality of early childhood educators. Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2015 Education for All 2000-2015: achievements and challenges. Paris: UNESCO.

⁶Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016). From best practices to breakthrough impacts. A science-based approach to building a more promising future for young children and families. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>.

The ECD practitioner workforce in South Africa

There are more than 100,000 early childhood development (ECD) practitioners in South Africa, working in various types of ELPs: playgroups, early childhood development centres, crèches, day mothers, and toy libraries.

Levels of training and experience amongst ECD practitioners vary dramatically, as does the quality of the services provided to children. ECD practitioners are typically not adequately remunerated and often work long hours in less than desirable circumstances. Opportunities to access quality training are limited due to the costs associated.

Improving learning outcomes from birth to five years will require resource and training providers to place greater emphasis on ensuring that the practitioners who are caring for and educating our young children are well-trained and highly motivated. The best ECD practitioners:

- Work under supervision with access to in-service training⁷ suited to their particular level of understanding and experience;
- Participate in continuous professional development opportunities⁸ that help the practitioner to implement specific curriculum activities and play-based learning for each important developmental domain;
- Have access to a community of practice, and receive onsite support by mentors,⁹ to help translate knowledge

into practice in a real work context and to encourage them to reflect on and continuously improve on the quality of their programme.¹⁰

What actions can we take?

- There are several exciting examples in low- and middle-income countries of relatively low-cost, high-reach practitioner training and support interventions using digital platforms and radio.¹¹ The training and skills development service providers should explore similar options to scale training in South Africa. Playsa.org is an example of free in-service training offered at scale.
- Particular attention needs to be paid to training and support for practitioners to address the key areas of concern identified through the Index i.e., the large proportion of children who struggle with Cognition and Executive Functioning (CEF) and Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration (FMC-VMI).
- Greater efforts should be made to improve the remuneration and the basic conditions of employment of the existing ECD workforce. Attracting new talent into the ECD sector is dependent on the training, employment, and career advancement opportunities in the sector.
- ECD practitioners are a key stakeholder group when it comes to sharing data from the Thrive by Five Index. Index findings need to be made accessible to practitioners in ways that are easy to understand and act upon.



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⁷Ganimian, A. J., & Murnane, R. J. (2014). Improving educational outcomes in developing countries: Lessons from rigorous impact evaluations Working Paper 20284. Cambridge MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

⁸Roberts, A. M., LoCasale-Crouch, J., DeCoster, J., Hamre, B. K., Downer, J. T., Williford, A. P., & Pianta, R. C. (2015). Individual and Contextual Factors Associated with Pre-Kindergarten Teachers' Responsiveness to the

MyTeachingPartner Coaching Intervention. *Prevention Science*, 16(8), 1044–1053. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s1121-014-0533-8>.

⁹Downer, J. T., LoCasale-Crouch, J., Hamre, B., & Pianta, R. (2009). Teacher Characteristics Associated With Responsiveness and Exposure to Consultation and Online Professional Development Resources. *Early Education & Development*, 20(3), 431–455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409280802688626>.

¹⁰Burchinal et al (2016). above

¹¹Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2005). Can Instructional and Emotional Support in the First-Grade Classroom Make a Difference for Children at Risk of School Failure? *Child Development*, 76(5), 949–967. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2005.00889>.