

Planting seeds of resilience in South Africa's ECCE through local hubs and collaboration

Sandra Bruwer, Lesley Wood & Benita Taylor

To cite this article: Sandra Bruwer, Lesley Wood & Benita Taylor (05 Sep 2025): Planting seeds of resilience in South Africa's ECCE through local hubs and collaboration, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, DOI: [10.1080/1350293X.2025.2551020](https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2025.2551020)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2025.2551020>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Sep 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 593



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Planting seeds of resilience in South Africa's ECCE through local hubs and collaboration

Sandra Bruwer , Lesley Wood  and Benita Taylor

Faculty of Education, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) took over responsibility for the early childhood care and education (ECCE) function in 2022 with the aim of expanding access and improving quality through regulation and professionalisation. However, the transformation of ECCE to align with government objectives requires grassroots engagement between invested stakeholders. One emerging idea is the establishment of localised ECCE hubs, yet the absence of a guiding framework hampers their development and sustainability. In this article, we begin this process by explaining the current landscape of ECCE in South Africa and theorising the necessity of stakeholder collaboration for improvement. We argue that there resides a pool of expertise and support within civil society, parents, local government, centre managers and practitioners which needs to be made available by setting up ECCE hubs to address the identified training, curriculum, resource and infrastructure needs at a local level. Guided by the principles of critical action learning (CAL) and systems theory, we emphasise the importance of sustainable relationships that foster mutual learning. Without such collaboration, and given South Africa's worsening economic conditions, the private ECCE sector risks further decline and even collapse. We share the knowledge generated by this article to urge all stakeholders to consider the power of collective action for change.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood care and education (ECCE); stakeholders; collaboration; ECCE hubs; sustainable growth; critical action learning (CAL); systems theory

Introduction

In South Africa's intricate early childhood care and education (ECCE) landscape, the sector itself can be likened to a delicate seedling, requiring the dedicated care, support and collaboration of stakeholders to grow and thrive. The ECCE sector involves various stakeholders, including caregivers, parents, practitioners, academic institutions, local government departments, non-profit organisations (NPOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The educators and practitioners support and promote early learning and development in infants, toddlers and young children in diverse settings such as

CONTACT Sandra Bruwer  Sandra.Bruwer@nwu.ac.za  Faculty of Education, North-West University, 11 Hoffman street, Potchefstroom, South Africa

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

crèches, daycare centres, home-based facilities and preschool programmes. In this study, ECCE includes any early learning programme (ELP) designed for preschool children, typically from birth to age five. As a holistic approach to child development, it includes health, welfare, safety and education, incorporating crucial elements such as play, learning and school readiness (Kernan, Euwema, and de Vos 2020). The South African government, recognising the fundamental importance of early education for all children, regardless of their family circumstances, has integrated ECCE into its 2030 National Development Plan (NDP) (DBE 2013). Consequently, the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) (Republic of South Africa 2015) aims to ensure universal access to early childhood development (ECD) services for young children and their caregivers, many of whom are not the biological parents of the child. The policy encourages investment in children's early development and learning, fosters an integrated multisectoral system and promotes effective leadership, contextualised curricula, coordinated planning, funding, implementation, monitoring and ongoing quality improvement. However, despite well-formulated policy by the national government, without adequate nurturing and protection at the grassroots level, this sector remains vulnerable to various external threats and struggles to grow sustainably.

Understanding the fundamental importance of nurturing all aspects of a child's growth and development, from physical well-being to cognitive and socio-emotional development, highlights the imperative of ensuring that quality ECCE programmes prioritise equity, professionalism in the workforce and accessibility (Molla and Nolan 2019). Just as a seedling needs a supportive environment to grow, the ECCE sector requires stakeholder collaboration to create a safe and nurturing environment for children, ensuring their security, growth and fulfilment of their potential (Reupert et al. 2022). Without such collaboration, the ECCE sector in South Africa faces a critical impasse, faced with serious challenges amidst a rapidly deteriorating socioeconomic landscape.

It is important to note that this article is the first in a series of four that comprise a broader PhD study. As such, it is conceptual, laying the theoretical and methodological foundation for the empirical work that will commence in the second article. In this article, we explain the current landscape of ECCE, to justify the need for stakeholder collaboration to nurture sustainable growth in the sector. We advocate for the establishment of local ECCE centres to address community needs. Drawing from critical action learning (CAL) and systems theory, we emphasise the value of fostering sustainable relationships to facilitate mutual learning among stakeholders. Ultimately, we theorise that without stakeholder collaboration and given the dire state of the South African economy, the largely private ECCE sector will continue to struggle to survive. Our long-term goal is to design, implement and reflect on a framework that would assist ECCE stakeholders to establish local ECCE communities of practice or 'hubs'. This article has two aims: (1) to raise awareness within the ECCE sector about the potential of such hubs and (2) to theorise about the ecosystem needed to cultivate a collaborative and sustainable environment for growth.

Taking root in barren ground: the current ECCE landscape in South Africa

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2 (United Nations 2015) aims to ensure universal access to quality ECCE, in preparation for formal education. However, the South African ECD (early childhood development) census of 2021 revealed

that only 1,660,316 children aged birth to five are involved in any form of ECCE (DBE 2022a). This statistic highlights that approximately 4 million children, mainly from disadvantaged households, do not access ECCE services and children in low-income areas who do have access are unlikely to experience the same quality of ECCE as their more affluent counterparts (Moses 2021). There is also a severe shortage in the provision of these services to the poorer population (Ashley-Cooper, van Niekerk, and Atmore 2019). This further exacerbates inequalities, hindering child development, contributing to intergenerational poverty and placing additional stress on caregivers (Coetzee et al. 2022; Fredman, Donati, and Naicker 2022).

Around 60% of ECCE centres in South Africa, operating as private or informal businesses, do not benefit from government subsidies and support (DBE 2022a). Even those who receive financial assistance only receive enough to cover 27% of their expenses (DBE 2022a). Stakeholders recognise that centre-based services alone are insufficient to achieve universal access to ECCE. There is a clear demand for home-based support services, such as playgroups and home stimulation programmes, to reach children who cannot attend fee-paying centres (EDTP-SETA 2023). These initiatives aim to provide essential developmental support and opportunities for children who cannot access formal educational settings, aligning with the objectives of the NIECDP and the DBE. In addition, there are disparities between rural and urban ECCE practitioners in terms of resources, salaries, working conditions and opportunities for further study and professional development (Kotzé 2015; Matshoba et al. 2021; Mbarathi, Mthembu, and Diga 2016; Rethman 2023; Zulu, Aina, and Bipath 2022). Often serving the poorest communities, these small, informal services are run by predominantly Black women out of private homes or rented venues, employ only a few staff members who receive minimum wage, and typically lack formal employment contracts or benefits (BRIDGE et al. 2020; Mampane 2021).

Less than 50% of ECCE practitioners possess a minimum NQF Level 4 qualification and more than 20% don't possess any ECD-related qualification (DBE 2022b). Despite the lack of formal ECCE training for practitioners, they are often skilled and knowledgeable, but still need support to improve service quality and meet (still emerging) norms and standards for the sector. In South Africa, the classification of early childhood education (ECE) qualifications has been vocational, rather than professional, resulting in practitioners not being able to register with the South African Council of Educators (SACE), which means that they do not have to adhere to the norms and standards for teachers as mandated in the Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Development Educators (MRQECCE) (DHET 2017), but also that they are not entitled to the benefits and remuneration given to professional educators. Furthermore, some ECCE practitioners may not recognise the importance of obtaining the minimum qualifications, viewing their sector as one with inherent barriers such as poor working conditions and limited professional pathways (Ncube 2017). The feeling within the ECCE sector is that practitioners need to be paid standardised government salaries, otherwise they feel no urgency for advancement in qualifications (Wood 2024, May 30). Consequently, the ECCE sector remains informal and unregulated, hindering efforts to improve the quality of education for young children (Harrison 2020; Mahadew 2021).

The barren landscape of ECCE is further worsened by unregistered or conditionally registered centres (EDTP-SETA 2022). Only 40% of the centres are registered (DBE

2022a), leaving the sector informal and susceptible to economic, political and social challenges (Wood and Neethling 2024) because these centres forego government funding and quality control measures. Given the limited government funding for ECCE, parents or caregivers often bear the financial burden of covering the costs of ECCE services, which are typically provided privately (Wills and Kika-Mistry 2021). To meet the objectives of the NIECDP (RSA 2015) and formalise the ECCE sector, it is crucial to increase the registration of ECCE centres, as the low registration rate and government funding threaten the sustainability of the ECCE sector, as it impedes efforts to improve quality, expand access and meet the developmental needs of young children. This suggests that to achieve quality ECCE in South Africa, it is necessary to confront systemic inequalities and barriers to access and resource distribution.

Drawing on our seedling metaphor, Figure 1 represents this ECCE sector, fragile, yet full of potential, yearning to grow and flourish.

The ground in which this seedling must grow is barren, plagued by economic pressures, political instability and social injustices (Kotzé 2015; Lawrence 2022; Thoka 2020). These threats cast dark shadows over the landscape, hindering the growth of the seedling and threatening its existence. However, in this challenging environment, the roots of collaboration among ECCE stakeholders run deep. These roots represent the collective efforts of ECCE stakeholders who recognise the importance of nurturing the ECCE sector. Together, they can work in synergy, sharing resources, knowledge and support to provide fertile ground for the seedling to thrive. As these collaborative efforts take root, they begin to sprout seeds of hope and resilience in the form of local ECCE hubs. These hubs can serve as oases in an otherwise barren ECCE landscape, providing essential resources, training and support to programmes and practitioners at the grass-roots level. While the ECCE sector may appear fragmented and underdeveloped, it is



Figure 1. Harsh terrain of the ECCE sector (generated with AI).

the fertile environment created by these hubs that enables the sector, as a delicate seedling, to take root and flourish.

Promising rain clouds to nourish the seedling can take the form of action learning groups (ALG) (Wood 2020) that come together to collaborate. Through their collective efforts, the stakeholders harness the power of collaboration, innovation, relationship and resilience to overcome the challenges facing the ECCE sector. And so, amidst the harsh and barren landscape, a transformation takes place as a symbol of hope and possibility for the future of South Africa's young children.

The strategic plan of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) aims to address these landscape challenges and professionalise the sector (DBE 2022a). In 2022, it took over responsibility for implementing ECCE from the Department of Social Development (DSD), a move, known as the *function shift* (DBE 2021), which aligns with global trends that favour universal access and child-centred pedagogies (Sims and Brettig 2018). With the transfer of ECCE oversight to the DBE, the new leadership has an opportunity to establish collaboration and trust with private providers and key NGO stakeholders, thereby laying the initial groundwork for a more sustainable, capable and accountable ECCE system (Wills and Kika-Mistry 2023). The DBE aims to regulate the sector to improve quality and to provide more subsidies and other forms of assistance, while also ensuring that practitioners become qualified (EDTP-SETA 2022). Therefore, a clear strategy is necessary to sustain ECCE while building the workforce's capacity through government and community advocacy and networking (Wills and Kika-Mistry 2021). The DBE (2023) has proposed a new ECD service delivery model in the form of a *Social Compact model*, which is a partnership between (1) the government, (2) social partners, (3) businesses and (4) donors, as well as (5) the ECD workforce. This model is meant to be publicly planned and coordinated, providing a variety of types of ELPs) based on the needs of local families and communities. The vision and plan for the Social Compact model will be co-developed by all stakeholders to strengthen and institutionalise systems for participation and shared solution building. This acknowledges the recognition by the DBE that they alone cannot improve access and quality in ECCE. Families, children and communities are integral to this Social Compact model. However, for such a model to work at ground level, the same collaborative approach must be adopted to meet the diverse needs of children and families within their specific contexts, promoting inclusivity and sustainability.

Therefore, to improve quality care and education for young children, the ECCE sector needs professionalisation, formalisation and regulation, which requires increasing the registration of centres, improving working conditions for practitioners and implementing professional development programmes, such as short learning programmes (SLPs) (DBE, 2023). To transform this barren landscape into a thriving environment, it is essential to cultivate deep-rooted collaboration among stakeholders, ensuring resilience so that ECCE can grow and flourish under harsh conditions.

The essential role of ECCE stakeholder synergy in strengthening the roots of seedling

To truly cultivate a thriving and equitable ECCE sector that meets the diverse needs of all young children, the synergy between stakeholders is indispensable; professionalisation and regulation, while crucial, are only part of the solution. We argue that transformation

requires collaborative efforts among various stakeholders to improve ECCE standards (Wood and Neethling 2024). Currently, stakeholders within the ECCE sector tend to work in isolation and compete rather than collaborate (R. Motaung, personal communication, March 3, 2023).

We advocate that a better approach would be intersectoral spanning health, education, social protection and socioeconomic development, undertaken by national, provincial and local government departments (Berry et al., 2013) to ensure the care and protection of all young children. The DBE has made efforts to establish intersectoral committees at the national level, but collaboration at the grassroots level remains limited (Atmore 2019; Hannaway 2022). The need to explore methods to improve integrated intersectoral collaboration among ECCE stakeholders remains evident (Manwedi-Thulo et al. 2023) to achieve ECCE outcomes more effectively and sustainably than if they were working in silos. The DBE (2023) emphasises the importance of collaborating and strengthening alliances with NGOs, civil society and the private sector to ensure high-quality education for young children, as do much research (Hannaway 2022; Harrison 2020; Wills and Kika-Mistry 2021). Active collaboration between practitioners and among practitioners and other stakeholders in ECCE can enable improvement in workplace well-being, as participation with others in the field facilitates the development of supportive relationships, opens up new possibilities for personal and professional advancement, imparts meaning and purpose to their work and fosters feelings of being valued, promoting health and happiness (Wood and Esterhuizen 2024).

Improving ECCE quality is not just up to practitioners, but it is a community effort (Buckley, Martin, and Curtin 2020), as care is deeply rooted in community life, including how they nurture children and their environment (Weldemariam et al. 2022). Poor quality involvement with significant adults can disadvantage young children, reducing their potential for successful life outcomes. There is also a tendency for caregivers to shift the responsibility for the stimulation of their child to practitioners. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) reinforces the importance of enabling an accommodation structure for significant adults in ECCE, to facilitate children's early learning by creating partnerships between practitioners and parents to advance the curriculum needs of young children and their families. Community dialogues at ECCE venues enable family participation, providing insights into ECCE. Active participation in ECCE by parents and caregivers builds beneficial relationships with practitioners (Dirks 2021; Marfo et al. 2004). Collaborative efforts are crucial for cultivating best practices in ECCE (Blaikie et al., 2020; Hu & Ødegaard, 2019; Manwedi-Thulo et al. 2023). Coordinated actions improve the ability of both practitioners and parents to deliver quality ECCE. Continued participation from various stakeholders supports children, their families and ECCE centres, thus improving the learning trajectory of young children while upholding the integrity of ECCE (Dirks 2021; Nores and Fernandez 2018; Wills and Kika-Mistry 2023). There have been some advances in this direction, Several NGOs have established regional and national forums to foster collaboration (Wood and Esterhuizen 2024). The DBE also recognises the importance of partnerships and collaboration at the municipal level to train municipal officials (DBE 2022b). However, there is an absence of strong ECCE leadership models that focus on including families and communities in ECCE (Stamopoulos 2015).

A participatory approach to ECCE services could empower stakeholders to build skills, develop agency and find solutions using local assets and resources. Draper et al. (2023)

highlights the valuable role of partnerships in shifting power asymmetries in ECCE in South Africa. Professional conversations between ECCE stakeholders can serve as an informed and effective approach to implementing policies, facilitating professional learning and driving practice change in ECCE to lead and support change and implementation at the grassroots level (Irvine and Price 2014).

Based on our positive experiences of participatory research in this field supported by recent research (EDTP-SETA 2020; Harrison 2020), we propose the concept of a local ECCE hub, as a physical and/or virtual space where stakeholders can receive advice, professional development opportunities and assistance at the local level. However, no research has yet been conducted on the specifics of such a hub, including its ideal structure, the stakeholders involved and the operational framework. This inspired us to research and develop a framework that will aid ECCE stakeholders to establish local hubs for collaboration, sustained quality improvement, regulatory compliance, advocacy and networking. Through collective action, we can cultivate the full potential of ECCE, nurturing not only the delicate seedling but also fertilising the ground from which it springs, while strengthening the roots for stability, towards the development of a healthy, sustainable sector. To meet the second aim of this article, we draw from critical action learning (CAL) and systems theory to help us theorise about the ecosystem needed for growth.

Cultivating a nurturing ecosystem to sprout sustainable ECCE hubs through critical action learning and systems theory

Referencing our metaphor in Figure 1, we envision the ECCE sector as a delicate seedling that requires a nurturing ecosystem to take root and flourish. Within this ecosystem, the ECCE hubs serve as vital oases, providing the essential nourishment, support and conditions needed for the sector to grow and thrive in an otherwise barren landscape. *Critical action learning* (CAL) (Pedler 2020) and *systems theory* (Jackson 2019) provide the tools to cultivate such an ecosystem (see Figure 2), fostering sustainable ECCE hubs. This ecosystem represents the synergy of interconnected systems that support the establishment and sustainability of ECCE hubs.

CAL examines power dynamics, social inequalities and broader systemic issues by integrating principles of critical theory and action learning; highlighting how critical reflection, collaborative problem-solving and collective action foster learning at individual organisational and community levels (Hauser et al. 2023). The primary aim of CAL is to address systemic challenges and social inequalities by engaging participants in critical dialogue and inquiry to explore their assumptions, values, emotions and power structures (Frantell, Miles, and Ruwe 2019), while also promoting collaborative efforts to create more inclusive, equitable and sustainable solutions (Trehan 2021). Coghlan and Coghlan (2015) emphasise active engagement with problems, collaboration among stakeholders, reflection on the iterative cycles of the action learning process and actionable outcomes as quality criteria for action learning. Combined with participatory action research to form participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), it emphasises the advantages of participatory engagement in improving professional practice (Zuber-Skerritt 2011). PALAR operationalises the three ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report (United States 1978): respect for persons, beneficence and justice. The principle of *respect for persons* acknowledges participants' autonomy and agency,



Figure 2. Nurturing ecosystem for sustainable ECCE hubs (generated with AI).

ensuring they are actively involved in decision-making and that their perspectives are valued (Wood and Kahts-Kramer 2023). *Beneficence* goes beyond merely protecting participants from harm; it seeks to maximise benefits, fostering positive change. *Justice* ensures fairness and equality in participant involvement and the distribution of benefits. To uphold these principles, PALAR strictly adheres to ethical guidelines, including obtaining voluntary informed consent and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, integrity, transparency and social responsibility. Thereby safeguarding the rights, privacy and well-being of all individuals involved as described in (Lyndon 2023).

ECCE stakeholders form and participate in collaborative action learning groups (ALGs) that become learning communities to collectively generate knowledge through reflexive dialogue and social interaction. Action learning empowers stakeholders to collaboratively challenge complex issues by questioning and reflecting within a committed learning community to address current issues and acquire knowledge to solve future challenges (Cho and Egan 2023). By actively participating in CAL, ECCE stakeholders can develop sustainable relationships, promote ongoing mutual learning and create inclusive and equitable learning environments for young children, their families and the community. To accomplish this, stakeholders must engage in ongoing reflection, dialogue and professional development to deepen their understanding of how their practices impact ECCE. They must actively seek to understand diverse perspectives and foster meaningful partnerships, involving families and communities in decision-making processes (Blaikie et al., 2020; Dirks 2021; Hu & Ødegaard, 2019; Marfo et al. 2004; Manwedi-Thulo et al. 2023). Through critical dialogue and action, stakeholders can continuously improve their practices, diminish power relations and build resilient relationships to improve ECCE locally.

Facilitation is a core aspect of CAL and is based on principles that prioritise equality, diversity and inclusion as foundational assumptions, thus enhancing and guiding the generation of organising insights of participants (Pedler 2020). Within the ECCE hubs, stakeholders come together to form learning communities, requiring the appointment of facilitators to support their collaborative efforts. Facilitators play a pivotal role in posing critical questions that aid stakeholders in identifying and discussing attitudes and beliefs that may impede collaborative efforts towards ECCE transformation. They are also tasked with fostering an inclusive atmosphere that celebrates diversity and encourages open sharing, building trust and resilience, and supporting advocacy for marginalised communities to access quality ECCE in South Africa. Consequently, we need to examine the implications of this ecosystem by identifying various ECCE stakeholders and different systems and evaluating their needs and achievements at the local level.

Systems theory is transdisciplinary, going beyond or across disciplines, and allows for the study of interconnections among systems and the interaction of systems with their environments (Silva et al. 2022). Systems theory emphasises interdependence, relationships and interactions among systems, as well as feedback, adaptability and flexibility to environmental contexts to enable the interconnected systems to cope with unexpected challenges and uncertainties (Patton and McMahon 2021). Systems theory makes it apparent that the sustainability of ECCE necessitates collaboration among various ECCE stakeholders across different systems to improve resources, salaries, working conditions and opportunities for further study and professional development to create a socially just ECCE sector that meets all children's developmental needs (Wood and Neethling 2024). Just as a gardener cannot predict natural disasters but can prepare for them by sheltering plants and providing support, ECCE stakeholders must consider the macro-political and economic systems impacting the sector. By working together as a cohesive group, they can create a resilient ecosystem, better equipped to withstand and adapt to external challenges. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model illustrates the interplay of systems at multiple levels: micro, meso, exo, macro and chronosystem (Crawford, 2020), encouraging a holistic view of ECCE hubs considering all its interconnected parts, such as children, families, practitioners, the community and the broader sociopolitical context. It highlights the value of relationships and the need to address issues at multiple levels, from the grassroots level to broader systemic structures.

These principles of CAL and systems theory have the potential to create an environment and climate conducive to the development of sustainable ECCE hubs and encourage the fostering of sustainable relationships among ECCE stakeholders to enhance mutual learning. Figure 2 illustrates these interconnected systems that can create a supportive environment and climate to develop local ECCE hubs, transforming them into oases in contrast to the current barren ECCE landscape.

Understanding the interconnectedness of different systems allows us to create a nurturing environment that supports the creation and sustainability of local ECCE hubs. To achieve this, we must enrich the foundational 'soil' by actively engaging the community to implement and nurture national policy at the grassroots level, ensuring proper allocation of resources, providing opportunities for professional growth and fostering strong partnerships. These efforts are crucial in overcoming systemic barriers, and each system is integral to the creation and maintenance of sustainable local ECCE hubs. The soil provides the context, the roots build the network, the clouds and rain

facilitate ongoing learning and adaptability in the learning community and the sunlight empowers stakeholders with the knowledge, training and support they need to succeed. By nurturing these interconnected systems, we can lay the groundwork for holistic, inclusive and resilient ECCE practices that benefit children, families and communities.

Conclusion

Transforming the ECCE sector in South Africa requires a collaborative effort to professionalise, regulate and formalise the sector while fostering deep-rooted collaboration among stakeholders. By embracing the principles of CAL and systems theory, we can cultivate a resilient and inclusive ECCE environment that supports the holistic development of young children. As stakeholders work together to establish local ECCE hubs, they not only nurture the ECCE sector but also create fertile ground for sustainable growth, ensuring that every child in South Africa has the opportunity to thrive. The metaphor of a nurturing ecosystem captures the essence of our envisioned approach to developing sustainable ECCE hubs. This concept fosters the growth of local ECCE hubs and ensures their resilience and adaptability in the face of changing social, economic and political landscapes. Bearing a healthy seedling does not depend on the seed itself but on the quality of the soil and environment in which it is planted. By cultivating such an ecosystem, we lay the groundwork for ECCE hubs to thrive as oases of learning and development. It is our collective responsibility to cultivate and sustain this ecosystem, ensuring it remains fertile and supportive so that ECCE, like a delicate seedling, can take root, grow strong and blossom into flourishing educational landscapes of the future.

This article forms part of a broader PhD study comprising a series of four interconnected articles. Together, these articles will explore the current challenges stakeholders face in delivering quality ECCE, articulate a vision for the ideal structure and processes of ECCE hubs to address these challenges and examine the sustainability of collaboration among diverse stakeholders. This series aims to provide a comprehensive roadmap for transforming the ECCE sector in South Africa through systemic, collaborative and sustainable approaches.

Acknowledgement

This research was conducted in collaboration with and funded by ETDP SETA Research Chair in Early Childhood Development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Sandra Bruwer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9597-6740>

Lesley Wood  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9139-1507>

References

- Ashley-Cooper, M., L. J. van Niekerk, and E. Atmore. 2019. "Early Childhood Development in South Africa: Inequality and Opportunity." In *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality: A Study of the Present Situation and Future Possibilities*, 87–108. Cham: Springer.
- Atmore, E. 2019. "An Interpretive Analysis of the Early Childhood Development Policy Trajectory in Post-Apartheid South Africa." Doctoral thesis. <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/items/99102ee6-bf0e-42d0-a6ef-990cab244d9>.
- Berry, L., L. Dawes, and H. Biersteker. 2013. "Getting the basics right: An essential package of service and support for ECD." In *South African Child Gauge 2013*, edited by L. Berry, L. Biersteker, H. Dawes, L. Lake, and C. Smith, 26–33. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.
- Blaikie, F., C. Daigle, and L. Vasseur. 2020. *New pathways for teaching and learning: The posthumanist approach*. Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Commission for Unesco. <https://dr.library.brocku.ca/handle/10464/15047>.
- BRIDGE. 2020. *The ECD Quality Toolkit Pilot Project*. <https://www.bridge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ECDQuality-Toolkit-Pilot-Report-20161115-Bridge-version.pdf>.
- Buckley, L., S. Martin, and M. Curtin. 2020. "A Multidisciplinary Community Level Approach to Improving Quality in Early Years' Settings." *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 18 (4): 433–447. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X20951239>
- Cho, Y., and T. Egan. 2023. "The Changing Landscape of Action Learning Research and Practice." *Human Resource Development International* 26 (4): 378–404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2022.2124584>.
- Coetzee, B., S. du Toit, R. Crouse, and A. Roos. 2022. "The Experiences of Early Childhood Development Care Centre Staff in Providing Care and Learning Support in a low Socioeconomic Community in South Africa." *Early Child Development and Care* 192 (14): 2338–2352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2021.2012172>
- Coghlan, D., and P. Coughlan. 2015. "Effecting Change and Learning in Networks through Network Action Learning." *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 51 (3): 375–400. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886314540210>.
- Crawford, M. 2020. "Ecological Systems Theory: Exploring the Development of the Theoretical Framework as Conceived by Bronfenbrenner." *Journal of Public Health Issues and Practices* 4 (2): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.33790/jphip1100170>.
- Department of Basic Education. 2022a. *ECD Census 2021*. <https://www.education.gov.za/ECD Census.aspx>.
- Department of Basic Education. 2022b. *Update on the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Function Shift*. Presentation by the Select Committee on Basic Education on 7 September 2022. https://static.pmg.org.za/220907ECD_Function_Shift_Update_Presentation_7_September_2022.pdf.
- Department of Basic Education. 2023. *South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes*. Pretoria, South Africa.
- Department of Basic Education (South Africa). 2013. *National Development Plan 2030*. Retrieved May 21, 2024, from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/ndp-2030-Our-future-make-It-workr.pdf.
- Department of Basic Education (South Africa). 2021. *Implications for ECD shift to Basic Education*. Retrieved April 13, 2024, from <https://www.education.gov.za/ECDFunctionShift2021.aspx>.
- Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (South Africa). 2017, 31 Mar. *Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to QUALIFICATIONS in Higher Education for Early Childhood Development Educators*. (Notice 299). Government Gazette, 40750.
- Dirks, J. 2021. "Parent–practitioner dialogue in ECCE: A case of the Eastern Cape. In *CERI2021 Proceedings: 14th Annual International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation*. Seville, Spain, November 8–9, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.21125/iceri.2021.2543>.
- Draper, C. E., C. J. Cook, R. Allie, S. J. Howard, H. Makaula, R. Merkley, R. Rahbeeni, N. Tshetu, and G. Scerif. 2023. "The Role of Partnerships to Shift Power Asymmetries in Research with

- Vulnerable Communities: Reflections from an Early Childhood Development Project in South Africa.” *Journal of Cognition and Development* 24 (3): 1–20.
- EDTP-SETA. 2020. *Early Childhood Development Sector Skills Plan*. Retrieved on May 28, 2024 from: <https://www.etdpseta.org.za/etd/sites/default/files/2022-12/ECD%20SSP%202019-2020.pdf>.
- EDTP-SETA. Apr. 2023. *ECD Labour Market Information & Implications for Skills Planning*. Retrieved on June 20, 2024 from: <https://www.etdpseta.org.za/etd/sites/default/files/2023-09/A%20national%20level%20research%20report%20on%20labour%20market%20information%20of%20ECD%20and%20the%20implications%20for%20skills%20planning.pdf>.
- EDTP-SETA. Nov. 2022. *Key Skills Change Drivers*. Retrieved on May 14, 2024 from: <https://www.etdpseta.org.za/etd/sites/default/files/2023-06/Research%20report%20on%20Key%20Skills%20Change%20Drivers%20in%20ECD.pdf>.
- Frantell, K. A., J. R. Miles, and A. M. Ruwe. 2019. “Intergroup Dialogue: A Review of Recent Empirical Research and Its Implications for Research and Practice.” *Small Group Research* 50 (5): 654–695. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046496419835923>.
- Fredman, S., G. Donati, and S. Naicker. 2022. “New Beginnings: The Right to Equality and Early Childhood Care and Education.” *South African Journal on Human Rights* 38 (3-4): 167–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02587203.2023.2214372>
- Hannaway, D. 2022. “Transformed Teachers Transform Education: Insights Shared by Early Childhood Lecturers.” *Cogent Education* 9 (1): 2118951. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2118951>
- Harrison, G. D. 2020. “A Snapshot of Early Childhood Care and Education in South Africa: Institutional Offerings, Challenges and Recommendations.” *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10 (1): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.797>
- Hauser, B., C. Rigg, K. Trehan, and R. Vince. 2023. “How to Facilitate Critical Action Learning.” *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 20 (2): 1–16.
- Hu, A., and E. E. Ødegaard. 2019. “Play and/or Learning: Comparative Analysis of Dominant Concepts in National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education in Norway, Finland, China, and Hong Kong.” In *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education* 2018. Vol. 37, 207–224. Emerald Publishing.
- Irvine, S., and J. Price. 2014. “Professional Conversations: A Collaborative Approach to Support Policy Implementation, Professional Learning and Practice Change in ECEC.” *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 39 (3): 85–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911403900311>
- Jackson, M. C. 2019. *Critical Systems Thinking and the Management of Complexity*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kernan, M., M. Euwema, and S. de Vos. 2020. *Never Only One Zebra’, A review of Measurement Frameworks in Children’s Care*. <https://iasc.hiberniacollege.com/bitstream/handle/20.500.13012/111/Never%20Only%20One%20Zebra%20FULL%20REPORT.pdf?sequence=1>.
- Kotzé, J. 2015. “The Readiness of the South African Education System for a pre-grade R Year.” *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 5 (2): 1–27.
- Lawrence, A. R. 2022. “Basic Educational Reform and Provision of Quality Education in South Africa (1994-2018): A Tentative Exploration of Policy in the Making.” Doctoral dissertation. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.
- Lyndon, H. 2023. “Embracing the Breadth of Ethical Complexities in Early Childhood Research.” *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 31 (2): 143–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2208469>.
- Mahadew, A. 2021. “An Inclusive Learning Environment in Early Childhood Care and Education: A Participatory Action Learning and Action Research Study.” Doctoral thesis. https://ukzn-dspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/20732/Mahadew_Ashnie_2021.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
- Mampane, S. T. 2021. *Discourse on ECD Practitioners’ Perceptions of Leadership Practices in a Multicultural Environment: The South African Context*. Paper delivered at the Annual International Conference of the Bulgarian Comparative Education Society (BCES). Sofia, Bulgaria. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED614107.pdf>.

- Manwedi-Thulo, L. P. J., O. C. Ifedi, U. C. Sunday, and A. T. Ogbeche. 2023. "Exploring Strategies to Strengthen the Integrated Inter-sectoral Collaboration among Early Childhood Care and Education Providers." *International Journal of Qualitative Research* 3 (1): 12–21. <https://doi.org/10.47540/ijqr.v3i1.907>
- Marfo, K., F. K. Agorsah, W. W. Bairu, A. Habtom, C. A. Ibetoh, M. R. Muheirwe, S. Ngaruiya, and E. M. Sebatane. 2004. "Children, Families, Communities, and Professionals: Preparation for Competence and Collaboration in ECD Programs." *International Journal of Educational Policy, Research, and Practice: Reconceptualizing Childhood Studies* 5 (3): 31–60.
- Matshoba, T., J. Shumba, H. Chinhara, and N. Nkhatau. 2021. *Exploring issues of quality in centre-based ecce programmes: A case of eastern cape*. In EDULEARN21 Proceedings (pp. 11808–11816). IATED.
- Mbarathi, N., M. E. Mthembu, and K. Diga. 2016. *Early childhood development and South Africa: a literature review*. https://ukzn-dspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/13338/Early%20Childhood%20Development_2016.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y.
- Molla, T., and A. Nolan. 2019. "The 'Universal Access to Early Childhood Education' Agenda in Australia: Rationales and Instruments." *Educational Research for Policy and Practice* 18 (1): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-017-9224-0>
- Moses, E. 2021. *Enrolment in Early Childhood Care and Education Programmes in South Africa: Challenges and Opportunities*. ECD Working Paper Series. No. ECD WP 002/2021. <https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Enrolment-in-early-childhood-care-and-education-programmes-in-south-Africa-challenges-and-opportunities-V05.pdf>.
- Ncube, G. 2017. "Perceptions of Early Childhood Development Practitioners Regarding Professionalisation." Master's thesis, University of Pretoria.
- Nores, M., and C. Fernandez. 2018. "Building Capacity in Health and Education Systems to Deliver Interventions That Strengthen Early Child Development." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1419 (1): 57–73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.13682>.
- Patton, W., and M. McMahon. 2021. "Career Development and Systems Theory: Connecting Theory and Practice." In *Career Development and Systems Theory*, 1–25. Leiden: Brill.
- Pedler, M. 2020. *Action Learning for Social Action: Taking Part in Social Change*. London: Routledge.
- Republic of South Africa. 2015. *National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP)*. Government Printers.
- Rethman, E. A. 2023. *Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners' perceptions of Their professional identity in two Early Childhood Centres in the Western Cape, South Africa* (Doctoral dissertation, Cape Peninsula University of Technology).
- Reupert, A., S. L. Straussner, B. Weimand, and D. Maybery. 2022. "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child: Understanding and Expanding the Concept of the 'Village'." *Frontiers in Public Health* 10:756066. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.756066>
- Silva, F., F. Coward, K. Davies, S. Elliott, E. Jenkins, A. C. Newton, P. Riris, et al. 2022. "Developing Transdisciplinary Approaches to Sustainability Challenges: The Need to Model Socio-Environmental Systems in the Longue Durée." *Sustainability* 14 (16): 10234. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su141610234>.
- Sims, M., and K. Brettig. 2018. "Early Childhood Education and Early Childhood Development: Do the Differences Matter?" *Power and Education* 10 (3): 275–287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743818771986>
- Stamopoulos, E. 2015. "The Professional Leadership and Action Research Training Model: Supporting Early Childhood Leadership." *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 40 (4): 39–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911504000406>
- Thoka, B. 2020. "Policy and Regulation as Enablers for Early Childhood Development Centres in Townships and Informal Settlements." Master's Thesis, University of Pretoria (South Africa).
- Trehan, K. 2021. "Systems Psychodynamics and Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship." *The International Journal for the Transformation of Institutions* 1 (1): 116–143.
- United Nations. 2015. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>.

- United States. 1978. *The Belmont report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research*. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Retrieved from <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/index.html>.
- Weldemariam, K., A. Chan, I. Engdahl, I. P. Samuelsson, T. C. Katiba, T. Habte, and R. Muchanga. 2022. "Care and Social Sustainability in Early Childhood Education: Transnational Perspectives." *Sustainability* 14 (9): 4952. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14094952>
- Wills, G., and J. Kika-Mistry. 2021. *New foundations: Strengthening ECCE provisioning in South Africa after COVID-19*. Research on Socio-Economic Policy working paper, University of Stellenbosch.
- Wills, G., and J. Kika-Mistry. 2023. *New foundations. The South African Response to COVID-19*, 205.
- Wood, L. 2020. *Participatory Action Learning and Action Research: Theory, Practice and Process*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wood, L. 2024, May 30. 2 Years Post Function Shift webinar.
- Wood, L., and S. Esterhuizen. 2024. "Enhancing the Well-Being of ECE Practitioners Working in Resource-Constrained Contexts." *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 14 (1): a1477.
- Wood, L., and S. Kahts-Kramer. 2023. "'But How Will You Ensure the Objectivity of the Researcher?' Guidelines to Address Possible Misconceptions about the Ethical Imperatives of Community-Based Research." *Research Ethics* 19 (1): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161221135882>
- Wood, L., and M. Neethling. 2024. "Professionalising ECCE in South Africa Is Not Child's Play! Determining Skills Gaps and Implications for Future Sector Development." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 32 (1): 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2241119>.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O. 2011. *Action Leadership: Towards a Participatory Paradigm*. New York: Springer.
- Zulu, P. P., A. Y. Aina, and K. Bipath. 2022. "Education and Training Experiences of Early Childhood Care and Education Practitioners in Rural and Urban Settings of Durban, South Africa." *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 12 (1): 1167–1178.