



**SAMUEL CENTRE
FOR SOCIAL
CONNECTEDNESS**



**MOTHO TRAINING
INSTITUTE TRUST**
Unleashing Potential

**Parental Involvement in Early Childhood
Development: Strengthening parental involvement
and social connectedness in South Africa**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report unpacks the link between social connectedness and Early Childhood Development (ECD), and how parental involvement in ECD can be strengthened. It is a collective study between The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness and The Motheo Training Institute Trust. The Motheo Training Institute Trust operates in South Africa as a multi-training centre offering quality ECD services through training ECD practitioners in a formal accredited ECD programme and other developmental studies throughout Southern Africa.

This study utilised both desktop research and primary research. Primary research was conducted through the use of semi-structured interviews with eight participants, consisting of four parents and four practitioners, to reveal current barriers and best practices for parental involvement and social connectedness. The results revealed that the current barriers to parental engagement are primarily a lack of knowledge by the parents on the importance of ECD, challenges in nutritional participation, and the lack of resources and partnership from the parents to the ECD centres. The report recommends that it is key for parents to receive information and training sessions on what ECD means, and on its importance, from practitioners, training centres and NGOs. Practitioners must increase transparency with parents on what their ECD centres have been implementing, and enable parents to have the liberty to initiate fundraising initiatives for the ECD centres. The government and NGOs should provide capital to ECD centres so they can be self-sufficient through their fundraising initiatives. Greater volunteerism and support is needed from the community, which can be done through creating awareness for the community of the current support required.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is defined as the educational period from birth up to entrance into primary school. It is a unique window of opportunity for children’s cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, which occurs as the result of the interaction between the environment and the child.¹ Access to essential quality health, nutrition, protection, early learning services, and social connections are key for children’s developmental needs. Parents, caregivers, and families are all central players in a child’s early development to ensure that the latter developmental needs are provided for.

It is estimated that forty three percent of children under five years of age in low income communities in the world are at risk of poor development due to extreme poverty and stunting.² Therefore, it is key to both conduct research and to understand what supports and resources can be provided to parents and caregivers, particularly in low-resource communities, to ensure the success of their children’s development. For this particular study, the focus was on low-income communities in South Africa, though such research could be expanded upon in a variety of contexts. While there is much literature on the importance of various support mechanisms, like grants and services, to help parents be more actively engaged in ECD, there is far less research on the role of social connectedness as a greater enabler of parental involvement, particularly during the early childhood stage, a critical gap in research that this paper seeks to at least partially address. Social connectedness refers to the quality of

¹ United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund, “Early Childhood Development in the UNICEF Strategic Plan,” Accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Early%20Childhood%20Development%20in%20the%20UNICEF%20Strategic%20Plan%202018-2021.pdf>.

² United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund, “Early Childhood Development, for every child, early moments matter,” Accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development>.

relationships between an individual and their peers, mentors, and community. It combats social isolation, which is both a consequence of and a contributing factor to poverty.³ This research paper was facilitated by the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness in partnership with Motheo Training Institute in order to answer the following questions:

- What resources and supports can be provided to help parents be actively involved and engaged in early childhood development, particularly in low-resource communities across South Africa?
- What is the link between social connectedness and ECD?
- What is currently working in the parental involvement space?
- What are the barriers and best practices to parental engagement?
- How can ECD practitioners and Motheo Training Institute better support and engage parents?

Research methodology

The information for this study was obtained through desktop research, as well as one-on-one telephonic semi-structured interviews with four parents and four practitioners based in Benoni, a town in Gauteng province east of Johannesburg in South Africa, and its surrounding townships, namely: Magoba Village, Daveyton, Etwatwa, and Chief A. Luthuli.

Data Analysis

To analyse the data collected through the interviews, this study utilised a thematic analysis method, as it served as an ideal method for analysing quantitative data within this context. A thematic analysis is a data analysis method whereby key thematic patterns within

³Synergos, "Deepening Social Connectedness: A review of Synergos' work to reduce isolation in Southern Africa from 2013-2017," Accessed 27 May, 2021, <https://www.syngs.info/files/deepening-social-connectedness-in-southern-africa-2013-2017.pdf>.

the collected data are identified and analyzed,⁴ allowing for a core narrative to be constructed.

Ethical considerations

Information was collected from the participants with their informed consent. The data from the interviews was recorded by the use of note taking, and through the recording of phone calls with the participants' full knowledge. The recordings were utilised solely for the purposes of data capturing, in order to ensure that critical information was captured correctly within this report. Participation was voluntary, and participants were able to withdraw from the study at any stage of the study, and for any reason; similarly, participants could decline to answer any question, and participate only in select parts of the study with no negative consequences. Information that participants requested be retracted for any reason would be deemed void.⁵ Fortunately, however, all the participants in this study completed their interviews, and no retractions were required. All of the information collected was regarded as both personal and confidential. Therefore, no names were mentioned in the interpretation of the data, and where applicable, pseudonyms have been used throughout the report. The information collected from the interviews was utilised for the sole purposes of this study, and was stored on the password protected private laptop of the researcher.

⁴ Moira Maguire & Brid Delahunt, "Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars," *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education* 9, no.3 (2017), 1-14.

⁵ The Norwegian National Research Committees, "Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology," Accessed June 15, 2021, <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology>.

KEY CONCEPTS

Social connectedness

Social connectedness encompasses both close and distal relationships with family, friends, peers, community, and the wider society. For children, it is of particular importance to have the parent-child connectedness. This is the degree of closeness, or warmth, experienced in the relationship children have with their parents or respective caregivers. High levels of parent-child connectedness are thought to contribute to daily interactions that are largely free from conflict, animosity, and mistrust, whilst also serving as a buffer against various external stressors.⁶ Social connectedness is deeply important for children, as meaningful social connections improve their emotional, physical, and economic wellbeing. Children who have a sense of belonging will typically also have high self-esteem, a positive self-image, and will feel capable, accepted, and encouraged. Being socially connected enables young children to participate in activities that strengthen their relations with their peers and communities, build resilience, and give a sense of belonging.⁷

Social Isolation

Social isolation is the inadequate quality and/or quantity of social relations with other people at different levels of interaction, be it individual, group, or community. It is, at a fundamental level, the deprivation of social connectedness. Social isolation can refer to how

⁶ Nicole Lizen, Lori A Rorelli, Steve Bean & Julie Taylor J, 2004. "Parent-child connectedness: Implications for research, interventions and positive impacts on adolescent health." Santa Cruz, CA: ETR Associates. ⁷ Synergos, "Deepening Social Connectedness: A review of Synergos' work to reduce isolation in Southern Africa from 2013-2017," Accessed 27 May, 2021, <https://www.syngs.info/files/deepening-social-connectedness-in-southern-africa-2013-2017.pdf>

⁷ Synergos, "Deepening Social Connectedness: A review of Synergos' work to reduce isolation in Southern Africa from 2013-2017," Accessed 27 May, 2021, <https://www.syngs.info/files/deepening-social-connectedness-in-southern-africa-2013-2017.pdf>

alone a person is, but even more so, it refers to how lonely a person feels. It may be experienced as a sense of being unable to approach others to find comfort, or being unable to engage physically or emotionally. A person may feel isolated even when surrounded by other people.⁸ In children, isolation serves as a form of deprivation, as the lack of human connection deprives children of the attention they need for healthy brain functioning and, consequently, their ability to function socially. Children who experience social isolation struggle with low self-esteem and poor emotional health, often resulting in behavioural and learning difficulties. For infants and young children especially, isolation harms their chances of healthy physical and psychosocial development. Poverty, stigma, premature burdens of care, school drop-out, and an inability to access services are circumstances which put children at an increased risk of experiencing isolation.⁹

Early Childhood Development

Early childhood development (ECD) refers to the physical, psychological, cognitive and social development events that occur during the early years of childhood (0-9 years), which have a lasting impact on a child's growth and development throughout his or her life. During the early childhood development stage, in the brain-building process, neural connections are shaped by both genes and life experiences, namely things such as good nutrition, protection, stimulation from talk, play, and responsive attention from caregivers. This combination of nature and nurture establishes the very foundation of a child's future.¹⁰

⁸ Synergos, "Building Social Connectedness a Brief Guide for Practitioners Working with Children and Youth," Accessed 17 May, 2021, <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/Building%20Social%20Connectedness%20%20A%20Brief%20Guide%20for%20Practitioners%20Working%20with%20Children%20and%20Youth.pdf>.

⁹ Motheo Training Institute Trust, "Promote healthy development in ECD programmes," Accessed 17 May, 2021, Learner Guide, Book 4, Unit Standard: 13845, Benoni.

¹⁰ Children's Bureau, "Child Mental Health," Accessed July 14, 2021, <https://www.all4kids.org/programs/child-mental-health-services-counseling/>.

Both the parenting and relationships children have in their early lives change connections in their brains. Children who are nurtured and loved will typically go on to develop healthy and normal brains, and have all the necessary brain connections. On the other hand, children who are not well nurtured and emotionally neglected will often fail to obtain full brain development.¹¹ The following image (*Figure 1*) depicts the different brains of toddlers who are both three years old, but show one that has experienced emotional neglect, compared to the other, who has been well nurtured.



Figure 1

Source: The New York Post (2017)

Social interactions are critical for children, impacting both long-term brain development and playing a major role in whether a child reaches all the milestones at the different stages in early childhood development.¹²

¹¹ United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund “Early Childhood Development, for every child, early moments matter,” Accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development>.

¹² Motheo Training Institute Trust, “Promote healthy development in ECD programmes,” Accessed 17 May, 2021, Learner Guide, Book 4, Unit Standard: 13845, Benoni.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement begins when the child is in the womb, and continues with the caregivers as the child grows older.¹³ Parental involvement entails the participation of parents in a wide range of their children's school-based and home-based activities to improve their education and wellbeing. In an educational context, it is beneficial for parents to involve themselves and to be involved by the school teachers in the learning processes of their children. This does not just refer to parents enquiring about the performance of their child in school, but taking an active role in communicating and developing a strong healthy relationship with education overall, so that the process of encouraging, mentoring, leading, and inspiring their children can be successful. This in turn leads to the cultivation of meaningful social connections, which assist their children with their learning and development. Involvement of parents is related to their position at home, such as through monitoring the learning of children, as well as participation in activities organised at school, including parent-teacher conferences, volunteer activities, various forms of parental activism, workshops, and seminars for parents.¹⁴

Community engagement

Children grow emotionally, intellectually, and physically through both their relationships and their community. They might find this community in school, at home, on the playground, in their neighbourhood, or in a faith-based community.¹⁵ The creation of a local community in early childhood becomes the foundation of a child's life. It helps them to learn about themselves, how

¹³ South African Government, "White Paper on Education and Training," Accessed July 13, 2021, <https://www.gov.za/documents/white-paper-education-and-training>.

¹⁴ Abie Nkekane, "Parental involvement in education," Accessed July 13, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324497851_PARENTAL_INVOLVEMENT_IN_EDUCATION.

¹⁵ Synergos, "Deepening Social Connectedness: A review of Synergos' work to reduce isolation in Southern Africa from 2013-2017," Accessed 27 May, 2021, <https://www.syngs.info/files/deepening-social-connectedness-in-southern-africa-2013-2017.pdf>.

to tackle challenges, how to build knowledge, and to thrive.¹⁶ Within these communities, children are gifted the opportunity to build relationships that support their emotional and physical development, and ultimately help them to succeed in life. This community involvement and engagement gives them a sense of belonging, and is crucial to the building of their identity, producing long-term benefits in their lives.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of the study were based on the information provided by the ECD practitioners and parents who took part in the study. In this study, a parent refers to both biological parents and any person who may not be a biological parent, but who nonetheless has parental responsibility for a child. An ECD practitioner is one who plans and prepares early childhood activities, facilitates and mediates learning, and observes and assesses the progress of children at an ECD centre.¹⁷

Four main themes informed the core findings of the study, revealing that the main barriers to parental engagement were:

- Lack of knowledge on the importance of Early Childhood Development.
- Lack of nutrition for children.
- Insufficient financial resources.
- Weak partnership between parents and practitioners.

The following unpacks the key findings of the study, and each point highlights both the

¹⁶ Motheo Training Institute Trust, "Promote healthy development in ECD programmes", Accessed 17 May, 2021, Learner Guide, Book 4, Unit Standard: 13845, Benoni.

¹⁷ ETDP-SETA, "Occupational Qualification: Early Childhood Development Practitioner," Accessed 16 July 2021, <http://www.etdpseta.org.za/education/occupational-qualification-early-childhood-development-practitioner>.

practitioners and the parents respective viewpoints.

Lack of knowledge on the importance of ECD

The practitioners highlighted that most communities and parents view pre-school as a child-minding facility, where children are looked after and fed until their parents collect them. However, in reality the ECD centres are places where children are educated, and where they develop friendships, which contributes positively to their physical, psychological, cognitive and social development. This lack of knowledge of what early childhood development means and its importance affects the involvement of parents, and is largely due to a belief that the child only starts learning and experiencing development when they enrol for primary school. Thus, there is low interaction and participation from communities and parents towards supporting the ECD centres for the development of the children. One of the practitioners, Nomsa, highlighted that:

The belief in townships is that children start learning once they reach Grade One, so imagine how difficult it is to make parents take anything done at our facility seriously. It is assumed that children do not learn, or do not have to learn anything, in their early years. So, when we seek their support they don't understand, and think we are being difficult.¹⁸

Jane is a practitioner who recently opened an ECD centre, and who stated that:

ECD practitioners are viewed as less skilled and qualified [than] a teacher in the primary school, so even when you talk to parents about what they should do with their children at home or what is needed, they don't take us, and the information we give them, seriously. With some of the children, I will give them homework and the parents or brothers or sisters do not take time to make sure the child does the homework by themselves. Instead, they do the homework for them, but the thing is, I know my children. I can tell when someone else has told them the answers or done their homework, also children are very honest. When I ask them they just tell me the truth that it was my brother who did this homework for me. Parents must know that when a child is in pre-school they are learning and developing, so they need to take the homework issue seriously and let the child

¹⁸ Anonymous (Practitioner), in discussion with the researcher, 22 June 2021.

do homework on their own while they help them and monitor them.¹⁹

Mr. Mosa is a parent of a four year old daughter, who stated the following:

I engage with my child every day by asking what she learnt at school and what she did, how her day was. I even ask her to demonstrate everything she learnt. I have seen that most parents do not do what I do, they do not take anything a child does seriously when they are in pre-school. They just pick up their children and never discuss how the day went at school, what they learnt, they just never ask them anything. They only start taking school seriously when the child is now in primary school. Parents must engage and take interest in what children learn and do while they are in pre-school, not wait until they are now at school. You will only find out some problems or things your child struggles with later when you could have seen it sooner.²⁰

From these statements, it emerges that for many parents, there is a lack of understanding in regards to early childhood development, and that it begins long before a child enters primary school. It then becomes critical to share with parents how important ECD is in their children's development, as once parents have this information, it will assist them in being more involved and engaged with their children from an early age, as well as encourage them to collaborate and work together with the children's teachers.

When conducting additional interviews, the picture of many parents lacking a degree of understanding around ECD becomes clearer still. Sophia is a parent, with one child aged three, and another one aged five. She stated the following challenge of parents not understanding the importance of ECD, and how it affects their involvement:

Parents think that children are not conscious of their surroundings and perhaps do not reason. It is important for parents to know that children have brains that process information and analyse no matter how small they are. Children are just like older people. At school, children share their experiences with teachers and friends through free-talk, and much is shared during these conversations. At times my child can even tell me bad or violent things their friend experienced. It is therefore important for parents to know that children absorb things and pick up

¹⁹ Anonymous (Practitioner), in discussion with the researcher, 22 June 2021.

²⁰ Anonymous (Parent), in discussion with the researcher, 23 June 2021.

habits. Parents need to understand that children need to be protected from negative experiences as it does traumatise a child, sometimes the red-flags are not evident immediately. Children need to be protected from abusive, visual explicit and negative verbal experiences as it does affect their character and interferes with their lives. Just because they are small it doesn't mean that bad exposure doesn't affect them.²¹

Another parent stated that:

I always want to know what is happening at my child's school, and I ask the teacher how they are doing and also for some tips I can implement at home. The problem I have seen is that some parents think they do not need to do much when a child is in creche.²² They just think it's just a kid, what do they know, so this makes the parental engagement minimal from some parents.²³

Based on the above parents' viewpoints, it is key to highlight that while children are young, they remain individuals and independent in their thinking and actions, and they do feel emotions. Indeed, they are at a critical stage of their life where they are developing cognitively and emotionally, and therefore, parental participation and what they are exposed to is very critical at this stage. Parents need more information sessions and workshops, in order to learn ECD and how their lack of positive involvement, and in some cases, how their children's exposure to violence, can create social isolation.

Lack of nutrition for children

The lack of participation from parents when it came to providing healthy food in their children's lunch bags was another issue which was highlighted by most parents and practitioners who were interviewed. Nutrition is a key element of ECD, and parents must ensure

²¹ Anonymous (Parent), in discussion with the researcher, 22 June 2021.

²² "Creche", or crèche" is a term stemming from the Latin word "cripia," which means crib or cradle, and over time, creche has come to have a meaning similar to "nursery." Creche is used throughout this report to refer to ECD centres.

²³ Anonymous (parent), in discussion with the researcher, 22 June 2021.

that they provide food that is nutritious to their children, as it aids in their cognitive development and general health. Practitioners and parents alike highlighted a degree of dissonance in the importance of nutrition compared to the engagement of certain parents with providing high-quality food. Vanessa, an ECD practitioner, stated that:

Some parents pack snacks for their children in the lunchbox, you will see a child in the morning with a huge sweet and chips, and it is winter and then they get flu, then there tends to be a flu outbreak at the creche. Parents are not participating in terms of providing healthy food. We teach their children the benefits of healthy eating, for example, how important an orange is. The children know, but now the parent doesn't do the same. When you tell the parent to give them healthy food, they say my child doesn't like fruits. Now the child will have a sugar rush and be so hyper they are difficult to teach in class because they ate junk food in the morning, which is their breakfast.²⁴

It is clear that parental involvement entails a collaboration between what is taught at school and at home, as the school is a community, which should be their second home. When children are taught at school about healthy eating, parents must endorse that information and pack food that is healthy for their children. Parents should explain the benefits of what their children are eating, and if possible, cook healthy meals with their children.

Notably, some regional pre-schools do provide food, but struggle to provide nutritious, adequate meals to children. This is a major challenge, because children need nutritious, adequate food, as it is difficult to learn when hungry. A challenge exists, whereby there is a lack of collaboration and resources between the parents and the practitioners to provide better nutritional food. Samantha, a parent of a four year old, stated the following:

Food is provided at the creche, where there is breakfast and lunch, but the food is not enough, it looks like they are struggling to get enough food. For example, they eat rice and mince, but the meal is small portions which will consist of two

²⁴ Anonymous (Practitioner), in discussion with the researcher, 22 June 2021.

tablespoons of rice for lunch, and for breakfast children must share one slice of bread and eat half an orange. The children do not get full and cannot focus and learn. The problem is you are not allowed to pack food for your child because we are in a township. Some children do not have parents who can pack food for their children and this creates problems because now children will be asking each other for food.²⁵

Food insecurity is a deeply-rooted issue, particularly when it is pervasive enough to be impacting ECD centres. However, a certain degree of mitigation is possible through collaboration between parents and ECD practitioners, such as by developing gardening projects together, so the produce can be sent to the nursery. Alternatively, parents could participate in fundraising activities together with the centres, in order to obtain funds to assist with the provision of healthier meals. Nonetheless, it must be noted that food insecurity is, at its core, a highly systemic issue, one requiring long-term policy changes, and a greater government investment into the nutritional wellbeing of parents and children alike.

Insufficient financial resources

In low-resource communities, factors such as poverty, unemployment, and sickness are common, which results in parents' primary focus becoming survival. Parents are more concerned about the basic daily needs of life, such as food and shelter, and have limited capacity to engage with issues beyond those of imminent need. The child's development and experiences then go largely unrecognised, because the importance is daily survival. Support and engagement from the parents to the ECD centre is limited due to inadequate resources. The following statements from two practitioners highlight this element:

There are no funds from the parents or support we can get from parents. We need contributions for chairs, paint and some toys to make the learning better for children. We remain under-resourced, sometimes without proper food, we have poor teaching and learning resources. We also need sanitizers and

²⁵ Anonymous (Parent), in discussion with the researcher, 23 June 2021.

thermometers because of COVID-19. The Department of Social Development processes to apply for funding take a long time...²⁶

Another issue highlighted was the lack of technology in the townships. Technology is highly needed with the adoption of e-learning based on the current COVID-19 pandemic, but also due to broader societal shifts towards an increased reliance on technology. However, in low-resource communities, parents often cannot engage technologically in e-learning for their children due lack of resources. Vanessa, a practitioner, highlighted the following:

Townships are under-resourced and most technology is found at middle class schools. Children deserve the right to as many opportunities of learning , however the socio-economic dynamics minimise this. The world is moving towards the 5th industrial revolution, and many poverty stricken communities remain unexposed to the educational advances and technology. I strongly feel that the standard at ECD centres has become monotonous and expectations have to be raised. The traditional idea of ECD might not be meeting the needs of the future generation. We believe we are introducing a unique and innovative approach to pre-school education in townships and a spectacle of resources would be beneficial for our youngsters, but these cannot be expected from parents as they cannot afford it.²⁷

Sipho, a parent, told us that:

We also cannot have children learn from home at our school because most parents do not have smartphones and tablets with internet to learn, or money to buy data bundles, so when there are hard lockdowns there is no learning for our children. Also the pre-school where my son attends sometimes they don't even have sanitizers, they also don't have thermometers to test our children for temperatures. The family dynamics in townships differ, not every child comes from a household like mine where it's a mother and father. Some are child headed households, children living with foster parents, or many relatives. Some parents are HIV positive, diabetic, the list is endless, so now getting those same people to come together as parents so we make financial contributions is difficult and it's like we are not being considerate to their difficulties.²⁸

²⁶ Anonymous (Practitioner), in discussion with the researcher, 22 June 2021.

²⁷ Anonymous (Practitioner), in discussion with the researcher, 22 June 2021.

²⁸ Anonymous (Parent), in discussion with the researcher, 23 June 2021.

These quotes reflect a broader finding, which is that, similar to the issue of food insecurity, the pervasive nature of poverty in low-resource communities means that many parents are unable to support a quality learning environment for their children. Similar to the issue of food insecurity, such systemic barriers to high quality education in early childhood must first and foremost be resolved through policy changes and long-term government investments. Parental involvement is also critical, of course, but it is only through systemic changes that such involvement will truly become feasible for many families in low-resource communities.

Weak partnership between ECD centres and parents

Given the pervasive issue of a lack of resources, practitioners highlighted that they come up with ideas to obtain funds for their centres in order to improve the learning conditions for the children. These may not be sustainable long-term solutions, but nonetheless, are an innovative showcase of practitioners stepping up when there is a lack of resources. Nevertheless, there is often a lack of interest from the parents in such activities, which is often attributed to the generational gaps between the parents and some of the practitioners. This can be seen in the following statement made by the practitioner Lerato:

Right now I am 54 years old, [and] most of the parents are 18 to 25 years old, they are very young. The problem is that most of the mothers do not go to work, so I cannot charge them high fees because they will complain and they won't pay, but the fees [are] for the food for the children. Food is now expensive, now with Covid I need to be buying sanitizers, my assistants need to be paid. So when I tell them that "let's do food gardening, sewing, or baking," they complain, saying "...ahhh ma'am! No, we can't do that. I don't know how to garden, ahhh..." and they laugh, but it's a serious matter because the money is benefiting their children. I have been in this industry for years and back in the day parents would not hesitate to do gardening and sewing to provide for the day care. Now there are challenges because the young parents do not want to work.

It is so stressing for me.²⁹

One key route through which the quality of ECD centres can be improved, as highlighted by the above quote, is through increasing partnerships between the parents and practitioners. In order for this to occur, however, more transparency from the centres is required, particularly in regards to the costs of daycare, such as through monthly updates and details on past purchases, which could assist parents in gaining perspective on the costs of running an ECD centre. This could potentially motivate them to take part in projects to raise funds for their children's ECD centres, or to become more engaged in other ways.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the critical importance of early childhood development, it is deeply important that ECD centres are given the appropriate amount of investment, both in the form of time and resources. ECD centres are especially critical in supporting social connectedness, an area of particularly key importance in the low-resource communities explored throughout this report.

Investment into ECD centres is one central recommendation, as these centres are often a key lifeline for young children in low-resource communities. The government should be taking additional steps to fund and support ECD centres, and to ensure that no South African children are left behind developmentally due to a lack of resources. As it currently stands, when there is funding available, the process to apply for and receive it is tedious and time-consuming. The Department of Social Development, which has the purpose to provide social assistance and alleviate poverty, has created systems of bureaucracy that are slow and difficult to navigate,

²⁹ Anonymous (Practitioner), in discussion with the researcher, 22 June 2021.

which has contributed to the lack of resources for the centres. The red-tape of this system is a challenge, because the administration processes often result in the late provision of funding, and in some cases, have created difficulties for some centres to comply with the requirements to even receive funding. Speeding up the bureaucracy behind the provision of funding, such as through a high-level policy recommendation, could play a central role in supporting ECD centres in low-income communities.

Related to the theme of investing in ECD centres, there is also a pervasive need to address systemic issues around food insecurity, particularly food insecurity in young children, which can cause stunting, among other health and development issues.³⁰ Food insecurity can be addressed via collaboration between NGOs and the government, but ultimately, this is an issue that *must* be addressed. Children cannot learn on an empty stomach. Systemic change is critically needed, and is a central component of fostering social connectedness within low-resource communities.

Another area of recommendation is that ECD practitioners implement the partnership model when engaging with parents. This is the most appropriate model in ECD, where teachers are considered to be experts on education, and where parents are viewed as experts on their children. The goal is to establish a partnership in which teachers and parents share expertise and control in order to provide the optimum education and development for children, each contributing different strengths. Mutual respect, long-term commitment to a wide range of activities, and sharing of planning and decision-making responsibilities are the essential

³⁰ United Nations Children's Emergency Fund, "Early Childhood Development, for every child, early moments matter," Accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development>.

components for true partnerships between parents and teachers.³¹ Within this model, the teacher is required to have reliable, confidential, and honest relationships with parents. Furthermore, the relationship must be based on mutual respect, which means respect both for the opinions of others and respect for the dignity of others. Effective partnerships require two-way communication that will enable the exchange of knowledge and ideas between all parties involved.³² This recommendation, to be enacted at both the community level and at the interpersonal level, is another core element to fostering social connectedness and building community within the context of ECD centres.

Additionally, more communication and knowledge must be passed to parents by the practitioners on the very concept of ECD, as well as on the broader work that the ECD centres have conducted, and their budgets. When transparency and communication is provided to parents, it builds a relationship based on trust, which in turn will foster better participation from the parents. Ideally, parents should be provided with progress reports and open days, so they can be appreciative that the centres are places which provide learning and development support. Though the issue of COVID-19 has created difficulties for practitioners to showcase the work they are doing with their children more frequently, there still needs to be an investment in providing parents with information, which could include some short manuals such as brochures and pamphlets on ECD so they can learn about it. There can also be the development of small groups, where each of the parents could go to the school, depending on COVID-19 regulations, in order to have a workshop where they learn about ECD from the practitioners, and see firsthand the work that is being done at ECD centres. Ideally, there could be constant facilitation of information sessions, workshops, and focus groups to assist parents with the task of parental

³¹ Ann, P,Turnbull,Rutherford, H,Turnbull,Elizabeth joy ewin & Leslie Soodak, , "Families, Professionals and Exceptionality. Positive Outcomes Through Partnership and Trust (Merrill Prentice Hall:New Jersey, 2010).

³² Ibid.

involvement. For example, such groups could include teaching parents a low budget healthy food, teaching them what the benefits of each food part creates, and teaching parents appropriate behaviors for their children, as parents will have different backgrounds. From a fundraising perspective, parents should be given a degree of liberty and the ability to provide suggestions of how they prefer to fundraise; perhaps younger parents prefer to fundraise through fun runs, having a fun modelling show, raffle tickets, and so forth, rather than through small scale farming methods and sewing. Overall, there is a need for greater parental involvement with ECD centres.

Lastly, more volunteerism should come from both the community and parents to bring forth learning activities. This could include perhaps offering their skill-sets, resources, and time to make pre-schools more interactive. Since most pre-schools struggle with providing a fully nutritious meal in low-resource communities, the local communities themselves can volunteer some of their farming products towards meal preparation for children, and donations of any useful resources they may have for centres. This, however, needs to be implemented by first creating greater awareness to communities, and by reaching out to community organisations, such as religious organisations and so forth, in order to educate communities about why such a need for support exists.

Ultimately, the process of supporting early childhood development should not fall purely on either the practitioners at ECD centres or on the parents of young children. It is a community process, and requires various levels of engagement.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, the aforementioned research questions can be considered to be answered in the following manner:

- ***What resources and supports can be provided to help parents be actively involved and engaged in early childhood development, particularly in low-resource communities across South Africa?***
 - Parents need to be provided with detailed information regarding early childhood development. They need to understand what ECD is, why it is an important stage for children, and how their active involvement has an impact on their child's growth and development in the future. Parents need to be provided with information through the implementation of information sessions, focus groups, workshops and training sessions, perhaps run by the ECD centres. When they have the latter, it will encourage parental involvement.
 - To ease the burden on parental involvement in low-resource communities, greater volunteerism needs to come from the community at large, and capital for ECD centre's fundraising initiatives should be provided by the government, NGOs, and the community to ensure that they are self-sufficient.
- ***What is the link between social connectedness and ECD?***
 - Social connectedness consists of all the valuable individual and community relationships a person has, which is critical for their well being. In the early childhood development stages of children, social connectedness is a key process to ensure the full development of their cognitive, emotional, physical, and social

abilities. Therefore, it is key for parents and practitioners to work together, because they are the key people who the children interact with and form social connections.

- Children in ECD begin learning social and emotional coping, therefore social connections have a strong link with ECD because they create positive impacts on the children's social and emotional health, which affects them as they grow older. Scientific studies have proven that strong positive social bonds create good emotional health for children in the early childhood development stage and support normal brain development.

- ***What is currently working in the parental involvement space?***

- Currently, what is working well in the parental involvement space is that parents are involved in the process of enrolling children in pre-schools, and in making efforts to ensure that their children are attending an ECD centre within their communities on a daily basis. They cooperate in terms of attending parent meetings, as well as through dropping off and picking up their children from school. This ensures that their children are in the care of trained ECD staff, who understand the cognitive, social, emotional and interpersonal skills that need to take place in their lives.

- ***What are the barriers and best practices to parental engagement?***

- The current barriers to parental engagement are mainly that parents often lack knowledge on the concept of ECD, and on how crucial this stage is for children. There is the mindset that ECD practitioners are not skilled, and rather, they are viewed as nannies, which hinders the cooperation and collaboration from parents to practitioners. This has resulted in challenges in the lack of parental

involvement for nutritional aspects of children, which are very key for the development of children's cognitive and physical abilities. Another key barrier is the lack of financial resources from parents in the low-resource communities, which hinders the nutrition and learning processes of children, as well as the inadequate partnership between parents and practitioners, due to the generational gap between the practitioners and parents and the lack of understanding that the home and the ECD centres both play a key role in the development and well being of children.

- ***How can ECD practitioners and Motheo Institute better support and engage parents?***
 - ECD practitioners and Motheo Institute can better support and engage parents through providing information sessions for parents on a yearly basis regarding the industry of ECD, highlighting why it is an important phase for children, the importance of parental involvement and social connectedness, and how ECD centres operate.
 - They should conduct training sessions and workshops, so that information can be provided to parents on hygiene, nutrition, care at home with children, and parental involvement at school and at home. These should also be conducted through obtaining experts in the field such as dentists, dietitians, pediatricians, phycologists, lecturers in the field of ECD and so forth, to present on various aspects of ECD to the parents.
 - They can host parent socials and meet and greets, where parents gather to get to know each other and the teacher while sharing a meal. These relaxed social platforms are ideal for parents to share the successes and challenges they face

in parenthood, while obtaining information from practitioners, experts, and other parents. This will create and foster a sense of bonding and togetherness with the parents, which will result in all the parents seeing that they are on the same side together with the practitioners.

- ***Limitations of the study***

- This research project only focused on executing primary research with the parents and practitioners located in Benoni, Johannesburg and its surrounding townships (Magoba Village, Daveyton, Etwatwa, and Chief A. Luthuli). The reality is that different low-resource communities in South Africa are diverse, with different experiences, and that the information which was gathered from this research cannot be generalised for all low-resource communities in South Africa. The study made use of a small sample of teachers and practitioners, and therefore the viewpoints and experiences of the participants could be different from a wider range of participants from different areas across the country. Along these lines, further research would need to be conducted in the different low-resource communities of South Africa, which would generate a bigger sample size, in turn providing more in depth information on the topic of early childhood development, parental involvement, and social connectedness in the low-resource communities of South Africa.

IMPACT OF THE STUDY

The findings and recommendations can be put into action by the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, Motheo Training Institute, Synergos, organisations in the child development and in the social connectedness space, and the government, primarily through

the facilitation of workshops and information sessions to parents in low-resource communities. The practitioners should also receive training and have workshops from these organisations on how they can create partnership and transparency with parents to increase parental involvement.

The government and relevant NGOs should assist the ECD centres through provision of capital, and work to address systemic issues within low-resource communities. This will ensure that the centres in low-resource communities are self-sufficient, facilitating easier engagement from parents. This study has also worked to create awareness on some key elements which need to be addressed in the community of Benoni. Parents in these areas in particular need greater knowledge about ECD, and the centres require resources for greater parental engagement.

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