Reach Alliance

Toward Equity in Early Learning:

Strengthening Informal Early Childhood Development Through Inclusive Support Models

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Center for Inclusive Growth

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Cover photo: Painted wall art (photo by Snapsync media)

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Above all, we hope these voices extend beyond this study, shifting the narrative so that informal educators are seen not just as caregivers, but as essential partners in the education system. They lay the groundwork for our country's youth, and they deserve the recognition, resources, and dignity necessary to flourish.

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Conception or design of the work	CR, LFM, LK, MMS, SM, SN
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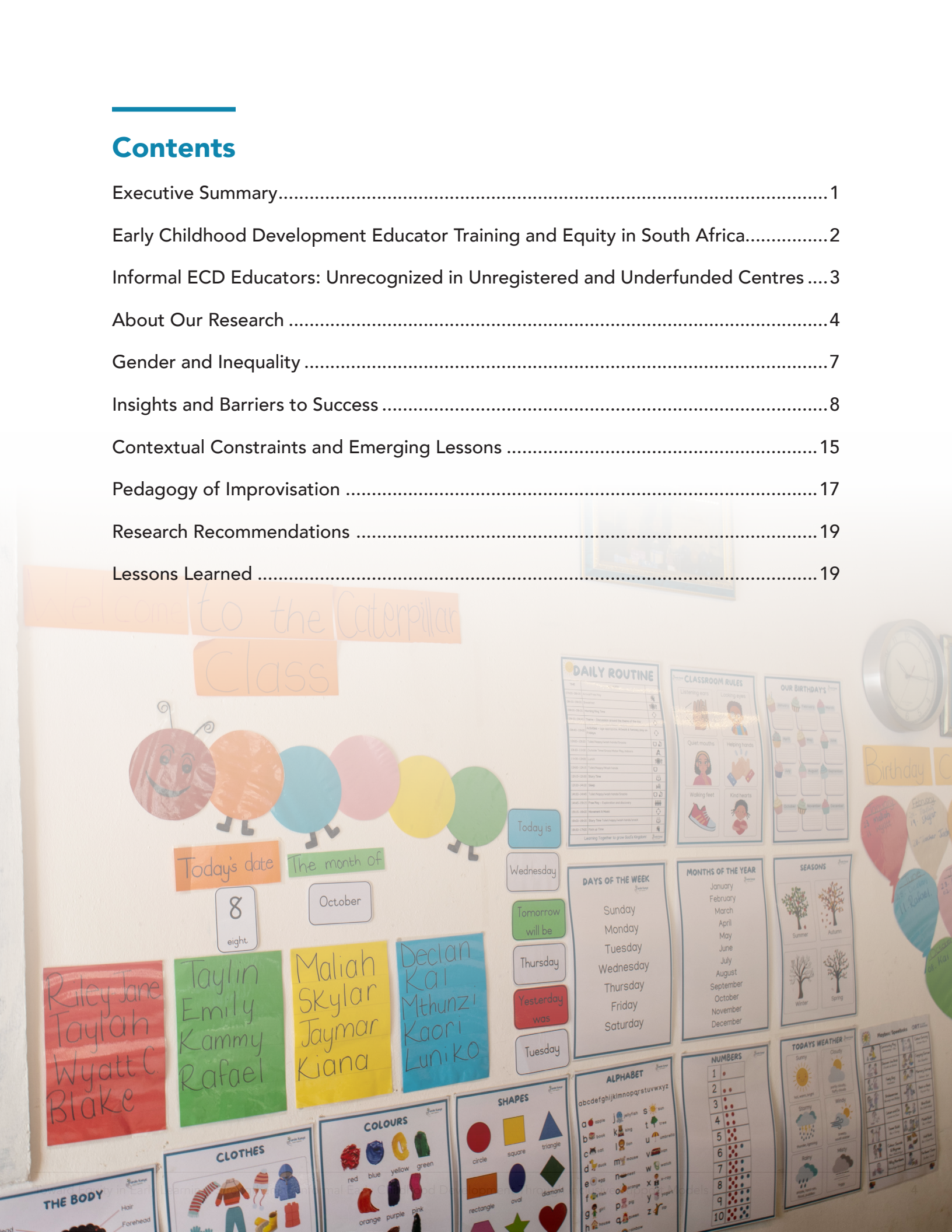

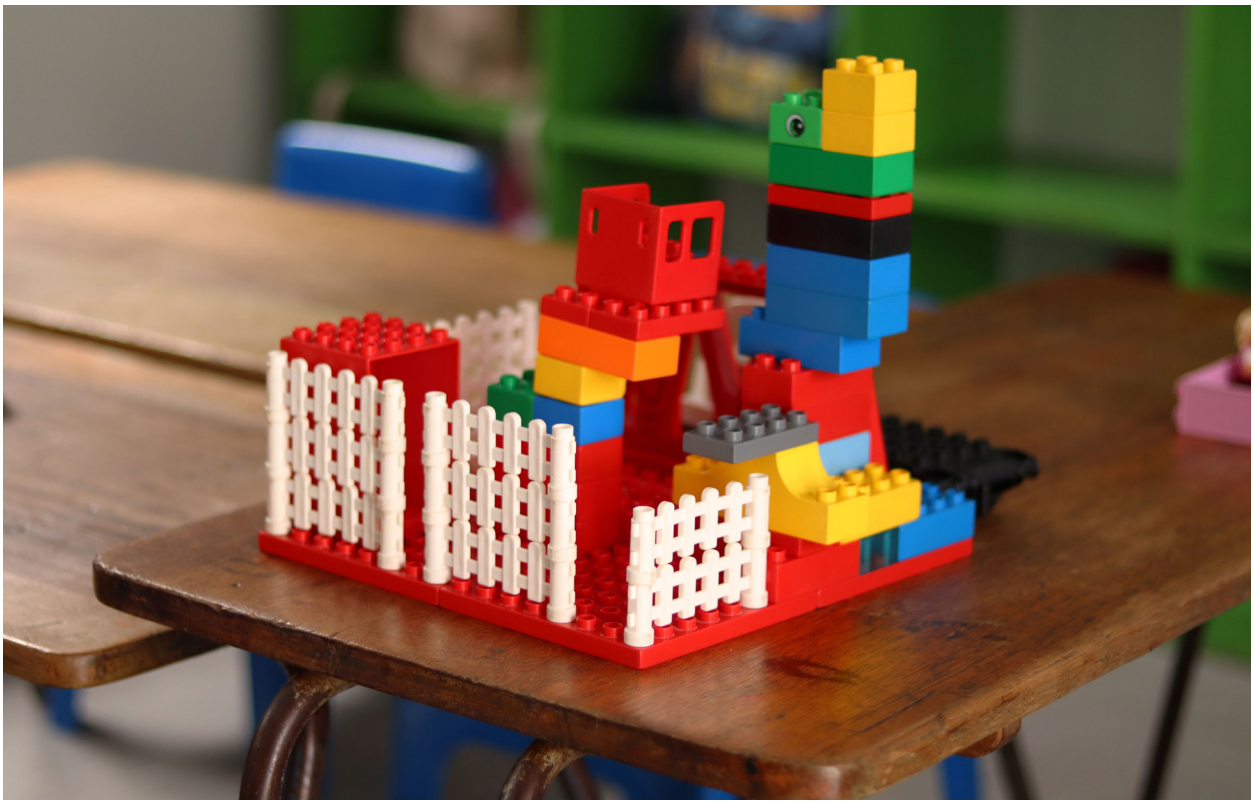

FIGURE 1. Children's classroom LEGO artwork (photo by Snapsync media)

Executive Summary

In South Africa, the quality and accessibility of early childhood development (ECD) programs remain deeply unequal, particularly in informal settlements where thousands of unregistered centres operate without funding or formal training. Our research examines how educators in these centres manage daily teaching with limited resources and minimal support. The findings highlight where training, funding, and policy interventions could make the greatest difference to improve outcomes for children.

This case study draws on qualitative fieldwork — focus group interviews and structured observation — conducted in select low-income communities across Cape Town as well as interviews with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in supporting ECD centres in Cape Town. We focus on informal educators operating in under-resourced contexts, most of whom are Black African women providing essential care services in precarious labour conditions. We document their adaptive strategies, training pathways, and the social value of their work which is often excluded from state recognition.

Our study includes a research-driven support model that centres on co-learning, contextual relevance, and pathways to formalization. While national strategies such as the ECD 2030 Strategy and Bana Pele drive system reform, educators' actual experiences are shaped by local networks, informal pedagogies, and mutual aid.[1]

1 "South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes: Every Child Matters," Pretoria, Department of Basic Education, 2023.

Early Childhood Development Educator Training and Equity in South Africa

South Africa's Early Childhood Development (ECD) landscape is shaped by deeply entrenched socioeconomic and gender inequalities, precarious working conditions, and systemic underinvestment.[2] However, through investments in ECD educator training and community-based provision models, the sector is poised to offer opportunities for hard-to-reach communities for social and economic transformation.

Early childhood care and education in South Africa are shaped by a mix of state, nonprofit, and private provision, with many services operating in conditions of limited financial and infrastructural support. A significant proportion of these centres are run by Black African women in informal or low-income areas, where practitioners often report low pay, limited access to professional development, and inconsistent state support.[3] Although the developmental benefits of ECD are widely recognized — especially for children facing socioeconomic disadvantage — available subsidies and infrastructure support remain insufficient to meet the scale of need. This affects the reach and quality of ECD services in many communities.

Recent national reforms — such as the launch of the 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes and the Bana Pele Registration Drive — signal a shift toward systems-level transformation.[4] However, a substantial proportion of ECD programs remain unregistered and therefore excluded from public funding and support. This directly impacts educators' ability to access training and quality assurance mechanisms, especially in informal settlement contexts. And children in these unregistered programs are the ones who will most benefit from well-trained educators.

Evidence from Ilifa Labantwana (a South African NGO focused on early childhood development) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) supports the importance of equipping educators with high-quality training and wrap-around support.[5] The SmartStart Child Outcomes Evaluation found that community-based programs can significantly improve child outcomes when basic pedagogical standards and support structures (like coaching and quality assurance tools) are in place.[6] OECD policy guidance reinforces that reducing inequalities in ECD requires cross-sectoral, evidence-based, and equity-focused approaches, including integrated staff development and targeted investments in underserved areas.[7]

Fiscal and policy analyses reveal that South Africa, like other African countries, allocates significantly less than the international benchmark (1% of GDP) to pre-primary education.[8]

2 ECD refers to the holistic care and education of children from birth to age six, encompassing physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development.

3 We highlight Black African women in this report because although South Africa is moving toward a non-racial society, inequalities and the injustices of our Apartheid legacy still leave an indelible mark on our society. Previously marginalized Black African women are still more disadvantaged than other women in South Africa. The majority of informal centres are run by Black African women, while centres run by women from other races are often more formalized.

4 Bana Pele (which means "children first" in Sesotho) is a South African government program providing integrated support services for children, ensuring access to health, education, and social protection. "South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes: Every Child Matters," Pretoria, Department of Basic Education, 2023.

5 Ilifa Labantwana works to expand access to quality early childhood development through research, policy advocacy, and systems innovation.

6 SmartStart is a national social franchise network providing standardized early learning programs and training for community-based ECD practitioners. "Briefing 1: SmartStart Child Outcomes Evaluation 2023 — Summary of Findings," SmartStart, 2023.

7 *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care: Starting Strong VIII* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025).

8 Kelsey Harris, Kehinde Ajayi, and Astha Mainali, "Childcare and Early Childhood Development Expenditures in Africa: Comparative Policy Insights for Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment," Policy paper, Center for Global Development, 2024.

While the recent ZAR 10 billion (approximately CAD 816,160,000) ECD budget allocation in the 2025 South African national budget may mark a turning point, with plans to increase subsidies and expand infrastructure support, effective implementation will hinge on improving educator training access, monitoring tools, and local governance capacity.

Strengthening informal ECD educator training is not only central to improving child development outcomes but also essential for redressing gendered labour market inequities and expanding care infrastructure in marginalized communities. Our research investigates the day-to-day pedagogical practices, challenges, and support needs of ECD educators in select informal settlements — contributing grounded, qualitative insight to national policy efforts and global ECD equity goals, particularly the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) and 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls).

Informal ECD Educators: Unrecognized in Unregistered and Underfunded Centres

Informal ECD educators are systemically excluded from state training, support, and regulatory frameworks — despite their foundational role in delivering care and learning to South Africa's youngest children. More than half of South Africa's 42,500 ECD centres are unregistered. They operate without subsidies and are led by women from marginalized communities.

Although national policy increasingly promotes formal certification as a pathway to professionalization, practitioners' lived experiences reveal a more complex reality. Many educators in informal centres face systemic and financial barriers to obtaining or maintaining certification.

Although national policy increasingly promotes formal certification as a pathway to professionalization, practitioners' lived experiences reveal a more complex reality.

Even those with years of practical experience express frustration that their competencies are not formally recognized. This tension between policy-driven standards and community-rooted experience affects teacher morale and, ultimately, the sustainability and quality of early learning in under-resourced areas.

Teacher retention remains a challenge because many educators leave ECD centres due to low pay, long hours, or better opportunities elsewhere, creating instability in the sector. At the same time, while many teachers hold formal qualifications, these do not always translate into effective classroom practice. The lack of practical preparation and ongoing support results in weak classroom management and poor learning outcomes.

The issues intersect with broader national failures to invest adequately in ECD and care work, despite mounting global and local evidence that quality ECD improves long-term educational, health, and economic outcomes. South Africa's ECD system is fragmented and market driven, with the state playing a limited role in workforce development and infrastructure provision.

This case aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and related targets.

- **SDG 4.2** aims to "ensure access for girls and boys to quality early childhood development and pre-primary education to ensure that they are ready for primary education." This phase of development is essential to lay a strong foundation for math and language concepts, and to identify any learning barriers that require interventions to ensure that children's development is not hampered. A well-organized early childhood program can also help identify the child's health and psychosocial well-being. Ensuring that children receive the right nutrition, immunization, and other supportive health checks, like sight and hearing screening, further ensures that development is not delayed. Behavioural problems stemming from special needs or familial or social problems can also be flagged early, and interventions through social workers or therapists can further greatly improve the outcomes for early childhood development.

- **SDG 5.4** calls on countries to "recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate." The government can support the primary providers of early childhood services by ensuring that ECD centres have access to support and public services to enable them to perform their primary service, to provide a healthy, safe environment for children to develop and flourish. Good childhood care is a cornerstone of familial responsibility and requires the involvement of mothers and fathers. The ECD sector is largely dominated by women, but men's involvement also contributes to changing the notion that childcare is a women's responsibility. By promoting programs that involve and educate fathers on early childhood, the responsibility for childcare is shared more evenly, and familial ties are strengthened.

HARDLY REACHED

The population we studied includes ECD educators working in informal settlements across Cape Town. These educators are predominantly Black African women with limited formal qualifications, operating outside of the registered ECD system.

They are considered "hardly reached" as a result of:

- spatial exclusion in informal settlements
- economic precarity and inability to meet compliance requirements
- gendered undervaluation of care labour
- lack of public infrastructure and professional development support.

Their centres serve low-income children from newborns to age five, many of whom face compounded vulnerabilities including food insecurity, developmental delays, and welfare dependency (in the form of child support grants or other government social assistance grants).

About Our Research

During our fieldwork, we conducted online interviews with NGOs and in-person focus groups with ECD principals (who are often also the founders and main teachers in these small centres) from Khayelitsha, Langa, and Hout Bay. Cape Town has more than 650,000 children under age nine, including about 79,000 in Khayelitsha,

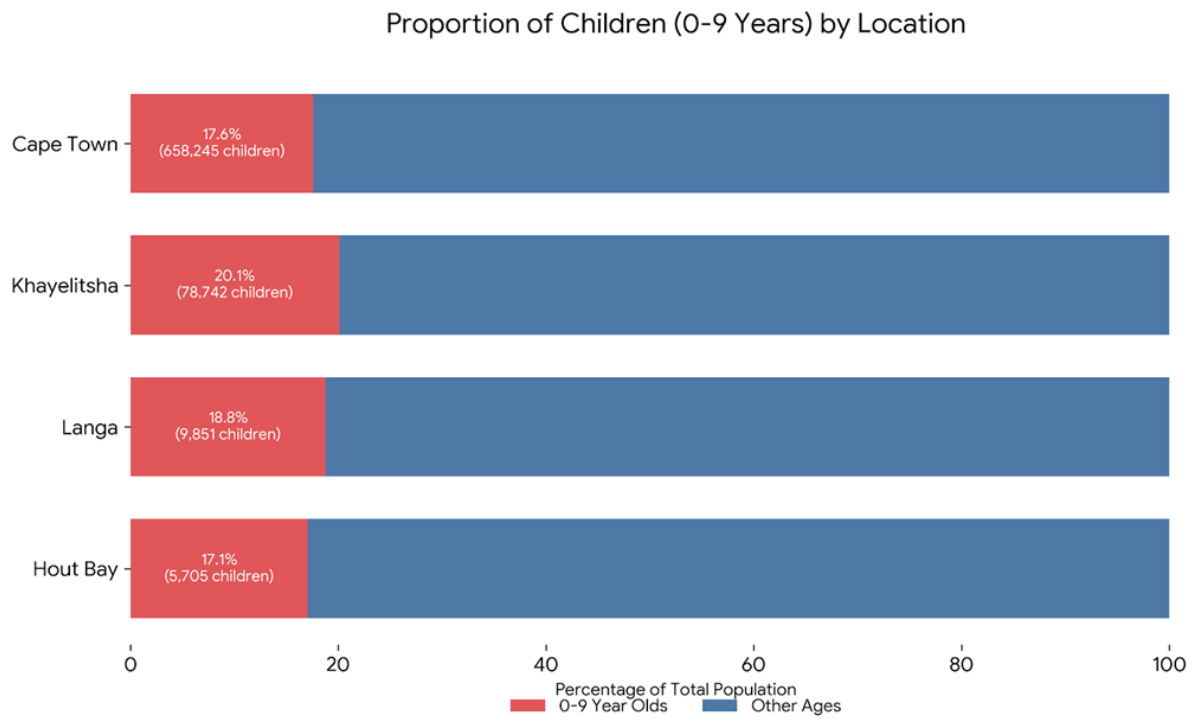

FIGURE 2. Population of children under age nine compared to total population (Census 2011)

10,000 in Langa, and 6,000 in Hout Bay.[9] We observed informal ECD centres in Imizamu Yethu and Hangberg — two under-resourced communities in Hout Bay — as well as ECD centres in Makhaza, Harare, and Nkanini inside the informal settlement of Khayelitsha. The team used a three-researcher structure for focus group facilitation, observation, and documentation, guided by an ethical protocol and participatory approach.

Table 1 summarizes the ECD principal participant profiles based on the assigned code, site, race of the principal, and number of children at the ECD centre.

We sought to understand:

- educator training access routes (formal and informal);
- teaching practices, resource improvisation, and community networks; and
- challenges navigating registration, infrastructure gaps, and subsidy eligibility.

We examined the awareness, perceptions, and challenges surrounding ECD in underresourced and informal communities. The aim was to understand how principals and NGOs conceptualize ECD and to identify the factors that shape its implementation and effectiveness on the ground.

The fieldwork revealed a notable shift in how communities are beginning to perceive ECD. Traditionally, ECD was seen as nothing more than childcare — a place where children could eat, sleep, and be safe while their parents worked. However, many now recognize that it is foundational to a child's long-term development, and that investment in ECD can change the trajectory of families. Interviewee I1 from Imizamu Yethu reflected on this change in perspective, saying, "We didn't even understand why we're going to preschool ... now we know we are

9 "Census 2011: Population by Age and Sex for Main Places (City of Cape Town)," Data set, Statistics South Africa, 2012.

Table 1. ECD participant principal profiles

Code	Site	Race	Number of Children
I1	Imizamu Yethu, Hout Bay	African	30
I2	Imizamu Yethu, Hout Bay	African	24
I3	Imizamu Yethu, Hout Bay	African	43
H1	Hangberg, Hout Bay	Coloured[10]	112
H2	Hangberg, Hout Bay	Coloured	55
I4	Imizamu Yethu, Hout Bay	African	15
K1	Harare, Khayelitsha	African	25
K2	Site C, Khayelitsha	African	40
K3	Makhaza, Khayelitsha	African	69
K4	Mandalay, Khayelitsha	African	88
K5	Site B, Khayelitsha	African	20
K6	Greenpoint, Khayelitsha	African	23
K7	Nkanini, Khayelitsha	African	61
L1	Langa	African	not disclosed
L2	Langa	African	not disclosed
L3	Langa	African	not disclosed
L4	Langa	African	not disclosed
L5	Langa	African	not disclosed
L6	Langa	African	not disclosed
L7	Langa	African	not disclosed

building a foundation for our kids." Despite this progress, deep-rooted misconceptions persist. Principals told us that many caregivers, particularly grandparents, still see ECD as equivalent to a crèche and struggle to understand why structured learning and resources are necessary.

Recruitment of ECD staff remains largely informal in these communities. Practitioners are often hired through word of mouth, leveraging the trust and familiarity that comes from living in close-knit areas. One interviewee described hiring two teachers after personal referrals and was impressed by how quickly they adapted and became enthusiastic about their roles. Although this approach benefits from strong community ties, it also reflects the need for more formal pathways into professional training and accreditation.

Training opportunities for practitioners are gradually increasing, thanks to the efforts of NGOs and some governmental initiatives. Practitioners are expressing a clear desire to learn and improve,

10 In South African demographics, *Coloured* is a standardized, nonderogatory official category representing a distinct, "non-white" or "non-Black" and multiracial multicultural South African.

but structural barriers often prevent their consistent participation in training. A recurring concern was the lack of classroom coverage when attending training sessions. As a trainer from Grow ECD put it, "In order for you to come to training on Thursday, who's going to teach your class?"[11] Now that the families know that they are trying to build a foundation for their kids, teachers themselves understand the importance of growing and improving in their role. As participant I1 from Imizamu Yethu told us, "The best day for us is to go for a training to learn more things."

Regulatory frameworks (such as rigid licensing, formal infrastructure norms, and subsidy criteria) disproportionately penalize informal centres, which are almost always run by Black women.

The sector has experienced significant structural changes, most notably the shift in ECD oversight from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Education. This transition has encouraged greater formalization and attracted more funding, especially through public–private partnerships. NGOs see this as a critical step forward, moving the field from informal daycare to a more professionalized, standards-based sector. However, they emphasized that much work remains to be done, particularly in aligning practitioner qualifications with the evolving expectations of the education system.

Gender and Inequality

Women work as front-line care providers in contexts of state neglect. In South Africa's informal settlements, women-led ECD centres form invisible but vital community systems. Our work aims to support gender equality by systematically capturing their invisible labour — the caregiving, educational, nutrition, and psychosocial support they provide — turning lived experience into evidence. We hope to contribute to knowledge translation by converting qualitative testimony and data into a compelling resource for policy advocacy. In doing so, this counter-narrative reclaims care work from the margins into public discourse and budget frameworks.[12]

Regulatory frameworks (such as rigid licensing, formal infrastructure norms, and subsidy criteria) disproportionately penalize informal centres, which are almost always run by Black women. Because many ECD programs remain unregistered, their staffing and operations fall outside the scope of state support, entrenching gendered economic precarity.[13] These exclusions operate not as incidental failures but as structural mechanisms that erode women's labour value and reinforce gender inequality.

STATE RECOGNITION OF UNPAID AND UNDERPAID CARE WORK AS FEMINIST ECONOMIC POLICY

> For women, who disproportionately bear the unpaid caregiving responsibilities … the availability of affordable and high-quality childcare services … has the potential to enhance women's economic participation.
>
> — Zitha Mokomane[14]

11 Grow ECD is a social enterprise offering ECD centres access to training, digital tools, infrastructure support, and quality-assurance systems.

12 "Year in Review 2024," Johannesburg: Institute for Economic Justice, 2024. See page 8, "African Feminist Economic Research and Policy Networks" for discussion of feminist care economies and women's community care labour.

13 K. Hall, C. Almeleh, S. Giese et al., "South African Early Childhood Review 2024: Cape Town: Children's Institute University of Cape Town and Ilifa Labantwana, 2024. See chapter 6, "Stimulation for Early Learning," 54–63.

14 Zitha Mokomane, "Are South Africa's Childcare Policies Serving Women's Economic Participation?" in *Women's Report 2021: Women and Property* (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University Business School, 2021), 4–16.

Building on feminist economic thought, we aim to leverage our findings to advocate for the state to formally recognize and invest in the care economy. This includes recommending stipends or wages for ECD practitioners, social protection for caregivers, and inclusion of care work in national accounting frameworks (i.e., GDP adjustments). Our knowledge-translation strategy seeks to create policy briefs, stakeholder dialogues, public campaigns, and strategic engagements with provincial and national gender and ECD departments. Through these mechanisms, we also aim to amplify women's voices, shift narratives, and press for systemic justice in how care work is valued and funded.

This approach aligns with both Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) and South Africa's National Gender Policy Framework (NGPF), both of which call for investment in care economies and support for women's economic participation. Under FIAP, Canada positions gender equality as a core priority in its international assistance, explicitly committing that at least 15 per cent of bilateral development assistance will target gender equality and women's empowerment.[15] The policy frames unpaid care burdens as a barrier to women's economic participation, and financial resources have been allocated to care-related programs globally.[16]

In South Africa, the National Gender Policy Framework recognizes care work as an essential component of women's empowerment and gender equity. However, despite these commitments, there is a significant implementation and impact gap. Women in South Africa continue to spend three to three-and-a-half (3.4) times more hours on unpaid care than men do, inhibiting their labour force participation and reinforcing economic inequality.[17] Research suggests that many women in informal ECD work do not benefit from social protections, subsidies, or formal recognition under existing policies. This gap is not incidental; it reflects the distance between policy intentions and structural realities. While policies espouse care economy investment, budget allocations, regulatory reform, and institutional uptake remain weak.

Insights and Barriers to Success

Our research revealed that:

- Educators rely on informal networks, peer-led training, and NGOs for training because they lack access to a formal training system.
- Pedagogical innovation is widespread despite limited resources.
- Systemic barriers include thresholds for subsidy eligibility, regulatory burdens, and uneven access to infrastructure support.

Barriers to educators' success include:

- fragmented ECD governance across the Department of Basic Education (DBE), Department of Social Development (DSD), and municipal structures;[18]
- lack of bridging pathways from informal to formal training or registration; and
- underfunding of grassroots training programs.

ACCESS TO TRAINING

Access to training emerged as both a lifeline and a persistent source of frustration across the

15 "Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy," Global Affairs Canada, 2017.

16 "Canada's Feminist Approach to Addressing Unpaid and Paid Care Work Through International Assistance," Global Affairs Canada, 2023.

17 "South Africa Places Paid and Unpaid Care Work as a Priority for G20 Working Group," Public Sector Manager, August 2025.

18 The Department of Basic Education (DBE) oversees primary and secondary schooling, including the administration of Grade R and formal ECD. The Department of Social Development (DSD) is the former lead department for ECD services, responsible for social welfare, community development, and protection programs.

three sites of Langa, Khayelitsha, and Hout Bay. Practitioners consistently described training as transformative — enabling them to improve lesson planning, gain recognition, and build professional confidence — but also as precarious, selective, and often beyond their reach. In Langa, a pilot of government training at NQF Level 5 (a post-high-school higher certificate qualification), was widely seen as a breakthrough moment. As L7 from Langa explained: "The government has piloted teacher training in Khayelitsha, equivalent to NQF Level 5. Teachers attend and receive a stipend of ZAR 2,900."[19]

Teachers felt that although qualifications are increasingly non-negotiable for recognition and progress, opportunities to pursue them are rationed.

This stipend for the training was not viewed as simply an allowance but as a form of recognition and acknowledgement of the practitioners' labour. Yet, even within this celebratory tone, skepticism quickly surfaced. L6 from Langa asked: "I understand the need for qualified teachers, but has the department created enough opportunities for us to get these certificates?"

While policy frameworks demand higher qualifications, the actual number of funded places remains limited and sporadic. Teachers felt that although qualifications are increasingly non-negotiable for recognition and progress, opportunities to pursue them are rationed. In Khayelitsha, interviewees emphasized the clear distinction that training made in classroom quality. K8 from Khayelitsha reflected that the investment in qualified teachers might lead to economic hardship, but improves the quality of education offered:

> I'd rather go for the qualified teachers, which is into diplomas and then go on to a Level 5. And I can see the difference in terms of planning, lesson plan, all those things. So now I don't have money … but at least I'll give what I can give you as long as I'm going to get the quality.

Khayelitsha participants pointed to the bureaucratic obstacles that entrench inequality. K7 said: "For them to be at college, we need to write a letter that's stating that they are volunteering or they are working as practitioners." In contexts where employment is scarce and informal and where contracts are rare, the need for such letters that confirm employment by an ECD centre functions as a gate-keeping mechanism keeping unemployed, untrained people from receiving formal training. What should be a pathway into training instead creates another layer of exclusion for educators already on the margins.

A practitioner in Hout Bay described training as a ladder of mobility — one that allowed her to move from cleaning or volunteering into professional teaching. H1 from Hout Bay said: "I started as a cleaner, and I only had matric that time.[20] And after three years, I got the opportunity to go to College of Cape Town to get my Level 5."

H1 from Hout Bay described how she actively supported her staff's professional growth, even diverting scarce resources to pay for training opportunities: "If we have volunteers and I see that your heart is at the right place, then I will give you the opportunity to go to the college. I will even involve you to go to trainings. The school will pay for you to go to trainings."

But as I2 from Hout Bay pointed out, exclusions and inequities cut across these opportunities. Migrant educators, in particular, described being

19 The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is a system that classifies and ranks educational qualifications to ensure they meet South African national standards. The qualifications are ranked with 10 levels. Level 4 represents foundational vocational training; Level 5 is a higher certificate in ECD practice.

20 Matriculation or "matric" refers to Grade 12, the final year of high school in South Africa.

shut out: "There's another organization who offers NQF 5 training, but they are sponsored, and that only takes South African citizens. So if you come from Zimbabwe, Malawi, you don't get a chance to study further."

This observation illustrates how citizenship status intersects with access to training, compounding barriers for those who already contribute significantly to community childcare but lack the paperwork to qualify. Against this backdrop, NGOs emerged as the most consistent and trusted providers of training. A trainer from Grow ECD explained its deliberate strategy to eliminate cost and connectivity barriers: "All our training is face to face, and we offer training every single week at our offices … We also offer online training … all the training is free of charge. And even the online training, we reverse bill, so we pay for your data usage."

NGOs are not only content providers but also ecosystem builders: they deliberately design training to be accessible, embedded, and socially responsive. Despite these efforts, constraints of time and finance remain pervasive.

Similarly, an interviewee from Sikhula Sonke (an NGO based in Khayelitsha) highlighted how language accessibility shapes learning: "There are also different sub-trainings that we do in the mother tongue … so that people could know and understand and also to build that desire, to practise that with the child." [21]

An interviewee from Funda Kunye (an NGO based in Hout Bay) emphasized building trust through relational engagement rather than top-down instruction: "We go and we form relationships and trust and we invite them … We don't want to be seen as going to say, oh, you must do things differently."[22]

NGOs are not only content providers but also ecosystem builders: they deliberately design training to be accessible, embedded, and socially responsive. Despite these efforts, constraints of time and finance remain pervasive. A Grow ECD trainer representative admitted: "We used to pay a travel stipend for every teacher … We cannot now without funding. So we're finding it really hard to try and reach the teachers."

Even when training opportunities exist, the daily pressures of running under-resourced centres mean that attendance is often impossible without external support. Yet, despite these barriers, training retained powerful symbolic value. For many, it was about dignity, legitimacy, and being taken seriously as professionals. Participant H1 from Hout Bay explained: "I'm always open to let the staff go for training. Any training — I will send the staff on so that they know what to do with the children."

Interviewee I2 from Hout Bay described the morale-boosting effect of continuous learning: "Sometimes we just need to refresh our memories … always a refreshing training, always adds something." Taken together, they reveal that while access to training is sporadic, conditional, and unequal, it remains one of the most valued forms of support available to practitioners. Training is not only about meeting government requirements but also about professional pride, improved practice, and recognition in a sector where both resources and respect are scarce.

RECOGNITION OF TEACHING QUALIFICATIONS

Getting their qualifications recognized stood out as one of the most complex and contested aspects of ECD practitioners' professionalization. On the one hand, they spoke about certificates

21 Sikhula Sonke is a community-based ECD organization in Khayelitsha focused on training practitioners, supporting playgroups, and strengthening parenting skills.

22 Funda Kunye is a nonprofit initiative supporting home- and community-based ECD programs through practitioner training and mentorship.

at NQF Levels 4 and 5 as valued milestones that conferred legitimacy. On the other, participants were deeply skeptical of whether these certificates genuinely reflected ability in the classroom. Across focus groups, practitioners voiced frustration with the administrative fragility of recognition systems. Certificates were often lost by institutions or abruptly invalidated by shifting requirements. Interviewee L9 from Langa explained how previously valid qualifications were suddenly rendered invalid: "Certificates were sometimes lost by institutions, old N-level qualifications were suddenly no longer recognized, and new requirements were introduced without clear justification."[23]

Some of the most capable teachers had never formally trained, yet they demonstrated caregiving skills, sensitivity, and classroom-management techniques far beyond those of their certified peers.

These abrupt changes left long-serving practitioners qualified on paper but blocked in practice, generating disillusion among educators who had invested years in building their profiles only to find their documents now meaningless. Cost also played a major role in shaping who could obtain and maintain recognition. Many practitioners come from communities where unemployment is high and parents cannot afford to pay sufficient fees to support training. This means that even when qualifications were theoretically available, the financial threshold excluded many educators. Participant K4 from Khayelitsha said "They take the kids from outside who do not have a background into their ECD for a stipend. That's why we are struggling. So if you take a teacher that is having experience, at least, you also learn from that teacher."

Participants also highlighted the tension between qualifications and experience. Some of the most capable teachers had never formally trained, yet they demonstrated caregiving skills, sensitivity, and classroom-management techniques far beyond those of their certified peers. As K7 from Khayelitsha put it when describing a care worker, "She doesn't have any qualifications. I kept her on babies. She's very good on babies, taking care, changing babies, and stuff like that. But now I need to equip her." By contrast, some graduates struggled to translate theory into practice. They entered classrooms unable to manage groups of young children or to prepare lesson plans effectively. Principals in Khayelitsha and Hout Bay confirmed that they often had to assign newly qualified teachers to experienced but unqualified staff for mentorship because without this bridging support, formal training did not reliably translate into quality practice. This paradox — in which experience is sometimes more highly prized than certificates — unsettled the entire recognition framework. As one NGO participant explained, "This demonstrates that some teachers in training attend college to access a basic income (through stipends) rather than to access training for their professional betterment."

NGOs again emerged as crucial in mediating these tensions. Organizations such as Grow ECD, Sikhula Sonke, and Funda Khunye provided alternative forms of professional development that focused on practice, mentorship, and contextual relevance. A trainer from Grow ECD described their multipronged approach: "We provide mentoring, workshops, videos, and online modules that are tailored to the realities of practitioners who may have limited literacy or who cannot easily access training centres."

While practitioners widely valued these NGO-led models, their impact was undercut by a structural problem. They are often not formally recognized

23 N-Level qualifications (N1–N6) are vocational certificates offered at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. They focus on trade and technical skills (e.g., engineering, business management) rather than academic theory. N1–N3 are roughly equivalent to high-school levels, while N4–N6 are postsecondary (tertiary) qualifications. Completing N6 combined with practical experience leads to a National Diploma.

by government systems like the South African Council for Educators (SACE), the professional body regulating teachers.[24] This means that teachers who gained immense benefit from ongoing mentoring and contextualized training remained excluded from the career mobility and pay progression associated with accredited qualifications. The result is a fragmented and at times conflicting system that ECD educators operate in: on one side, a bureaucratic apparatus of certificates that are costly, unstable, and often detached from classroom practice; on the other, an ecosystem of NGO-driven mentoring and contextual training that is widely effective but formally invisible. Teachers found themselves caught between these two systems, unable to convert valuable experiential knowledge into state-recognized legitimacy.

Taken together, the findings suggest that recognition in the ECD sector needs to evolve into a hybrid model. Practitioners argued not for abandoning qualifications, but for recognition structures that also validate demonstrated practice and experiential knowledge. Several proposals surfaced through discussions:

- recognition of prior learning (RPL) to accredit experienced practitioners without forcing them to start from scratch;
- observed practice assessments with mentors, recording and validating classroom management and lesson delivery as evidence;
- co-accreditation of NGO modules, ensuring that training already delivered to thousands of practitioners counts toward official qualifications; and
- stability safeguards, so older qualifications retain value over transition periods and practitioners do not lose their professional identity overnight.

Participants identified how the recognition debate is not about dismissing certificates, but about aligning recognition with real competence, ensuring that both theory and lived practice are valued within the professionalization pathway.

Taken together, participants' narratives demonstrate that while formal recognition offers legitimacy, the current qualification landscape is fragmented, inconsistent, and often misaligned with the practical skill sets necessary for high-quality ECD work. A more equitable and realistic approach would recognize both pathways: maintaining standards for formal qualifications while validating and supporting experiential learning.

THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE OF TRAINING

During fieldwork, practitioners, principals, and NGO representatives repeatedly emphasized that certificates and diplomas alone did not guarantee effective teaching. Instead, the quality of practice depended heavily on experience, mentorship, and the ability to translate theory into the dynamics of a noisy and under-resourced classroom.

Several principals noted that many newly qualified teachers struggled to apply what they had learned in college once they entered the classroom. K4 from Khayelitsha described the problem candidly: "These youngsters, they are just there for money. They play on the phone. I ask them Where's your lesson plan? But they don't know. The one said to me, can you help me and do the lesson plan for me?"

This view was confirmed by direct observation. During site visits, we found that some young teachers could not prepare lesson plans or weekly themes, despite having completed diplomas that included these tasks as a core skill. Some teachers also tended to spend time on their phones during class time instead of interacting with children in their care, further undermining quality. In contrast, teachers with no formal qualifications but significant classroom experience often excelled. These practitioners developed effective routines

24 SACE (South African Council for Educators) is the statutory body that registers teachers, promotes professional development, and upholds ethical standards in education.

for managing children, improvising teaching aids, and maintaining classroom order. Some NGOs reinforced this pattern by deploying mentors to bridge the gap between theory and practice. A trainer from Grow ECD explained: "We not only provide classroom kits but also send mentors to support teachers. These mentors observe lessons and check whether teachers can apply what they learned in training."

This combination of tools and mentorship was especially effective for newly qualified teachers, who otherwise risked being overwhelmed. NGO trainers also suggested that bridging courses could help newly qualified teachers transition into real-world practice. These courses, they argued, should focus on classroom management, strengthening responsive caregiving practices (as teachers often influence caregiver behaviour), and the early identification of learning difficulties.

This was underscored by cases where children with possible developmental delays were disruptive, leaving underprepared teachers struggling to cope. Another dimension of the theory–practice gap was language. While South Africa has 12 official languages, ECD centres often receive children from neighbouring countries so there is even more language diversity in the system. While teachers can often speak multiple South African languages or at least understand them, only teachers who are foreign nationals speak and understand other African languages. Many NGOs provided training in English, which served as a common medium. However, principals found that in practice, children learned better when teachers used their home languages first and then translated into English. As K7 from Khayelitsha observed:

> We first make sure … that we teach them in Xhosa. It's easier for them to understand another language if you first make them understand their own language … So what I do — I first make sure that they do understand things in my language, which is Xhosa, then it's easy for me to translate to another language.

None of the participants had received training on how to incorporate multilingualism and home language education in their programs, yet most of them have to find ways to do this every day. This approach of starting with the first language before moving onto a second helped overcome language barriers in multilingual classrooms and supported inclusivity.

The gap between theory and practice also played out differently across sites. In Khayelitsha, teachers who had received even basic NGO training showed stronger classroom practice: they used lesson plans, improvised effectively, and were regularly supported by mentors who gave feedback. However, resource constraints still often forced teachers into survival mode. Large classes in single-room structures created high noise levels, and teachers had to "shout over each other" to be heard. In such contexts, NGOs focused more on ensuring safety and ventilation than on pedagogy.

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NGO-provided curricula, though not formally registered, were described as being equivalent to NQF Level 4 in terms of rigour. Importantly, these curricula remained up to date because they incorporated continuous feedback from teachers and mentors. This contrasted with the static syllabi of formal colleges, which often felt disconnected from the realities of informal centres.

Formal training without mentorship risks producing "paper teachers" — certified but ill-prepared for daily realities. By contrast, experiential learning, contextual mentoring, and language-sensitive pedagogy enable teachers to thrive even without certificates. The solution

that practitioners pointed to was not to abandon formal qualifications, but to supplement them with practice-oriented bridges: ongoing mentorship, contextualized curricula, and recognition of experiential expertise.

TEACHER RETENTION

If training provides opportunities and recognition signals legitimacy, then retention is what allows those investments to bear fruit. Across two of the three sites, retention emerged as one of the most fragile points in ECD work's lifecycle. Teachers described a constant churn driven by low pay, unsustainable hours, and the lure of better prospects elsewhere. For principals, this turnover disrupted continuity in teaching, undermined centres' stability, and made workforce planning almost impossible.

Practitioners were unanimous in identifying low salaries as the primary driver of turnover. In unregistered centres operating in low-income communities, fees are deliberately kept low so that parents — many of whom are unemployed — can afford to enroll their children. This leaves little room for salaries that even approach a living wage. One principal noted that teachers in her centre earned around ZAR 1,200 per month (approximately CAD 98) despite working punishingly long days that started at 5:00 a.m. to accommodate parents commuting from Khayelitsha to town and often stretched until 7:00 p.m. when the last children were fetched. This reality pushed some to abandon the sector altogether. The founder of Funda Kunye described one principal who "actually decided to find a job as a police woman. So she went up and closed her school." Without structural support, even the most committed practitioners eventually seek more viable alternatives.

Ironically, training and recognition often accelerate attrition. Principals across Khayelitsha and Hout Bay explained that once teachers completed Level 4 or 5 training, they quickly moved on to better-paying positions, most often in government primary schools. The founder of Sikhula Sonke summarized the trend:

> One of the major issues is that those who are qualified in the ECD sector, they tend to be attracted in the local primary schools, with Grade R schools that are attached to the primary schools. This means that the formal ECD facilities and the informal ECD facilities within the townships or within the households or within the communities or the community ECD facilities are still lacking the professional people to provide education.[25]

This creates a paradox where centres invest scarce resources to upskill their staff who then leave, producing a revolving-door effect where professionalization undermines continuity. Retention is further influenced by fluctuating attendance and income. During school holidays, many parents withdraw their children, assuming older siblings can provide care. Winter brings an additional squeeze when heating costs rise while fee income drops. This volatility means principals cannot guarantee consistent salaries. Teachers either leave pre-emptively or remain demotivated, constantly looking for alternatives.

The impact of this kind of churn was starkly described by NGOs attempting to track the workforce. The founder from Sikhula Sonke mentioned how difficult it was to retain staff: "With this certain qualifications, and six months down the line, all those teachers are gone. There's quite a new set of teachers." This instability erodes not only institutional memory but also mentoring systems. Newly qualified teachers often require guidance from more experienced colleagues. When experienced staff leave, that mentoring layer disappears, weakening the integration of theory into practice. For children, it means fractured relationships with caregivers, an issue particularly damaging in the early years when consistency is critical for emotional development.

25 Grade R is the reception year before Grade 1, introducing five- to six-year-olds to structured learning as part of South Africa's formal schooling system.

Another theme that surfaced was the motivation of younger practitioners entering through Further Education and Training (FET) colleges. Principals reported that some students were primarily attracted by the stipend that accompanies study, rather than a genuine interest in teaching. As K4 from Khayelitsha explained, these teachers would often "spend time on their phones," avoid responsibility, and resist preparing lesson plans. By contrast, others — often without formal training — had a natural aptitude for working with children but did not wish to pursue further qualifications because they preferred working in the kitchen preparing meals and cleaning, limiting their professional growth. This mixture of disengaged stipend-seekers and talented but stagnant natural carers creates a fragmented workforce and further complicates retention.

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Faced with this cycle of exit and instability, practitioners and NGOs consistently proposed that the government should create a database to track qualified ECD teachers. Once a teacher completes their training, they should be able to return to their ECD centre and earn a government-funded salary that matches their qualification level.

This proposal reflects the recognition that salary parity and external funding are necessary if professionalization is to benefit the very communities where ECD centres are most needed. Without government-funded salary scales, centres cannot compete with formal schools, and the attrition loop continues. While salary parity was the headline demand, other mechanisms also emerged:

- protected planning time during the school day, reducing burnout and allowing teachers to apply training effectively
- micro-benefits such as transport stipends or meal support tied to attendance, which could help teachers manage the daily costs of participation
- role progression inside centres, with categories such as "lead teacher" or "mentor teacher," so that growth is recognized even without immediate exit to formal schools.

Focus group participants highlighted a crucial point: retention is not simply about keeping staff numbers steady. It is the factor that determines whether training investments and recognition reforms translate into better classrooms. When trained teachers leave, children in community-based centres are left with less experienced, more transient caregivers. The system as it currently stands trains teachers for exit, not for continuity.

Contextual Constraints and Emerging Lessons

The professional realities of ECD educators do not exist in isolation. The daily work of teaching, training, and retaining practitioners unfolds within a wider ecosystem defined by infrastructural deficits, uneven policy implementation, and fragile social support systems. Across all sites, educators consistently located their professional challenges within these broader material and institutional contexts.

FIGURE 3. Children's classroom artwork — An example of children showcasing creative freedom (photo by Lehlohonolo F. Makomene)

INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUES

Safe, stable learning environments remain the foundation of effective teaching, yet the physical and regulatory landscape confronting ECD centres reflects enduring spatial inequities. Practitioners in informal settlements described operating under conditions that are both precarious and punitive. The Langa ECD Forum spokesperson put it plainly, "the same norms and standards expected in Constantia are demanded in an informal settlement. How? It doesn't make sense." Many centres function from repurposed homes, shacks, or shipping containers with limited ventilation, sanitation, or outdoor play areas. Teachers reported that compliance costs — such as development fees, building plans, or land-use approvals — far exceeded their means. Instead of partnership, they encountered punitive monitoring. As L5 from Langa explained, "I fix what I can, within my means. But then they come and find another corner to criticize. Honestly, I don't want to die because of this stress."

UNEVEN POLICIES

Municipal zoning and land allocation policies were particularly obstructive. Practitioners recounted being denied "land letters," which are required to register centres or receive subsidies.[26] The consequences were devastating. As L7 told us, L8 from Langa lost years of investment when their structures were demolished without warning, "I built with ZAR 22,000 of stokvel money.[27] Then law enforcement demolished it, saying the councillor had other plans. They said they would build a park there instead." While practitioners often rely on councillors for land letters as a form of local permission, formal approval for establishing or upgrading ECD centres is governed by the City of Cape Town's land-management processes, which depend on tenure, zoning, and the type of development proposed. Our fieldwork suggests that many ECD operators are aware of councillor-issued land letters but less familiar with the formal municipal procedures required for development approval.

In Hout Bay, contradictions were equally stark. Some centres operated in municipal buildings but still could not achieve registration because the city failed to provide lease agreements or building plans. As I2 summarized, "we are now a city-owned building, so they are responsible for repairs and maintenance. But for the city, it always takes a lot of time … That is why we cannot get full registration, because of the lease agreement [and] no building plans."

26 Land letters are informal documents issued by local councillors to indicate community permission to use a piece of land; however, they do not confer formal development rights or municipal approval.

27 A stokvel is a community-based savings scheme in South Africa, where members agree to contribute a fixed amount of money regularly, with the goal to provide mutual financial support to help each member achieve their financial goals. "What Is a Stokvel?" Nedbank, 2025.

These testimonies show how local government bottlenecks affect every stage of the professionalization cycle. Without secure land tenure or compliant buildings, centres cannot register. Without registration, they cannot access subsidies. And without subsidies, they cannot afford to release, train, or retain practitioners.

Educators learn best when knowledge is relational and iterative, not abstract.

Infrastructure and policy are not peripheral issues — they are the structural conditions that determine whether training, professionalization, and retention are possible at all.

FRAGILE SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Another important thread was access to professional information or support. Teachers repeatedly said that information matters only when it is practical and followed up. The founder of Sikhula Sonke explained, "So, the old-fashioned in-person training method is still working for us. And then after that, during the week, our coach and support workers together with the facilitators — they do the site visits." Mentoring and recurring visits, rather than one-off workshops, were consistently identified as the most transformative form of professional support. This mirrors earlier findings about training efficacy but reframes them through the lens of resilience: educators learn best when knowledge is relational and iterative, not abstract.

Nutrition remains an essential yet under-researched factor, with early evidence suggesting that food insecurity and inconsistent meal provision directly affect classroom engagement and learning outcomes. Across sites, teachers reported that many children arrived hungry or without packed meals, which made concentration difficult and undermined daily routines. Practitioners often cooked food they paid for from their own pockets to ensure no child went without food, while NGOs such as Lunchbox and ForAfrika provided intermittent relief. However, coverage was uneven, and reliance on philanthropy left many centres vulnerable to funding cycles. A systematic approach is urgently needed to integrate nutritional support, subsidies, and feeding schemes into the broader ECD ecosystem, ensuring that learning and well-being are treated as inseparable.

When read together, these contextual pressures highlight the structural inequality within which ECD practitioners operate. However, we also heard about practitioners' extraordinary ingenuity. Teachers act as social workers, administrators, cooks, counsellors, and mentors, often within makeshift buildings and minimal pay.

Pedagogy of Improvisation

Despite systemic hardship, we also heard of striking patterns of resilience and innovation. Teachers continually adapted their practice to the realities of poverty, diversity, and overcrowding. This adaptation produced what one might call a pedagogy of improvisation — grounded in care, community knowledge, and local resourcefulness.

Language and inclusion were central to this. Teachers described classrooms where children arrived speaking a range of home languages, often with little or no English. In response, practitioners developed creative communication strategies. For example, I1 from Hout Bay recalled, "sometimes I was stuck. So I ask, What do you want? Are you hungry? While pointing to their lunch box. Then they see what the other kids do, and they follow them. They just learn quickly." Over time, children began to switch between languages fluidly. "After some time, they all speak in English … now they can speak more proper

English than me." Such accounts show language not only as a barrier but also as a bridge — a site of adaptation and mutual learning.

Another recurring theme was the inclusion of children with special needs, particularly those with autism or developmental delays. H1 from Hout Bay reflected on a moment of breakthrough with one such child: "some days he's out of control … but I literally wanted to cry when I saw him doing every step in the dance class." Teachers admitted that they often lacked medical or psychological training but relied on intuition and observation to support children. "We told her we are not doctors, but we know, because he couldn't reach his milestones." Their stories demonstrate that teachers are already performing sophisticated forms of inclusive education, even without formal support structures.

A less expected insight concerned fathers' involvement in ECD. Grow ECD shared that they now run workshops to counter biases against male participation. An interviewee from Grow told us "we do a workshop on how to include fathers in your preschool, how to show equal respect … because a teacher often turns a father away because he hasn't paid the school fees." This initiative reframes parental engagement as an equity issue, recognizing that gendered assumptions shape how care is distributed and valued.

In often difficult conditions, teachers innovate constantly: developing inclusive pedagogies, translating training into practice through trial and error, and holding communities together through care work that is largely invisible to the state.

In often difficult conditions, teachers innovate constantly: developing inclusive pedagogies, translating training into practice through trial and error, and holding communities together through care work that is largely invisible to the state.

These findings reaffirm that systemic barriers — particularly infrastructure and governance failures — directly mediate the success of training and retention initiatives. They also show that strengthening the ECD workforce requires not only formal training pipelines but also policy environments that recognize and resource the social realities in which teachers work.

Research Recommendations

Participant recommendations to ECD centres, Department of Basic Education, and NGOs	Researcher recommendations to ECD centres, Department of Basic Education, and NGOs
Offer a basic food handling and nutrition training to ECDs to improve nutrition standards in the centres.	Motivate for fiscal allocation for basic education: implement a corporate or government-funded subsidy for teacher salaries and to support ECDs in under-resourced areas to accelerate their documentation and official registration.
Create a national database and register of qualified ECD teachers to track their qualifications and professional development.	Develop a collaborative national accreditation system to recognize formal qualifications, informal training, and experiential learning for ECD teachers.
Issue training accreditation, standardize salaries, and expand opportunities for further training for teachers to attain higher qualifications and to retain those qualified teachers.	Review policies and regulations to avoid political interference or misuse of the red tape in terms of land use and resource allocation to address infrastructure challenges at ECDs in informal settlements.
Strengthen training models and incorporate inclusive programs such as the fatherly or male-figure participation or family-centred learning programs.	Fast-track Bana Pele registration to reach hard-to-reach informal settlements to provide access to financial support for ECDs.
	Offer teacher special needs training on identifying children with unidentified special-learning needs and/or disabilities.
	Review the *Basic Education Laws Amendment Act* regarding language in terms of the ECD learning context to better support multilingual learning and equip teachers to promote multilingualism in the centres.

Lessons Learned

This research provides an overview of the challenges faced by the ECD sector. Namely:

- Informal ECD educators are a critical but overlooked layer of the education system.
- Community-rooted models of professional development are effective and scalable.
- Policy must shift from compliance-based to capability-based support.

Infrastructure challenges continue to affect the quality and accessibility of ECD services. In many informal settlements, centres struggle to meet even the most basic requirements, such as adequate sanitation facilities. One respondent noted that their organization maintains updated data on registered facilities in areas like Harare, which often need assistance to comply with departmental standards.

The social environment in which ECD services operate cannot be separated from broader

community realities. Many children come from households affected by poverty, domestic instability, substance abuse, and limited adult supervision. One practitioner described the community as being "surrounded by high domestic drama, high poverty, high alcohol intake, high drug abuse." These conditions significantly undermine children's developmental readiness and place additional emotional and behavioural burdens on ECD practitioners. Participants warned that without targeted investment in early learning, these challenges will resurface later in the education system. As one practitioner described it, not addressing these issues results in "socially, academically, and emotionally dysfunctional learners."

Efforts to improve communication and accountability within the sector were also highlighted. Some organizations conduct regular site visits, hold stakeholder forums, and use digital platforms such as WhatsApp, SMS, and social media to maintain active communication with centres and practitioners. This approach has helped reinforce trust, share policy updates, and create a sense of collective responsibility for service delivery.

The sector is in transition. Early childhood development is increasingly recognized as a critical stage in a child's life, deserving professional standards and sustained investment. While progress has been made in awareness, training, and policy alignment, significant gaps remain. Misconceptions, infrastructure limitations, and social challenges continue to undermine the potential of ECD in vulnerable communities. Addressing these barriers will require not only increased resources but also deeper engagement with caregivers, practitioners, and local structures. Formalizing pathways into the sector, strengthening training and support mechanisms, and contextualizing interventions for high-risk environments are all essential steps toward ensuring that all children, regardless of background, have access to quality early learning experiences.

FIGURE 4. Outdoor play area for the children (photo by Snapsync media)

Research Team

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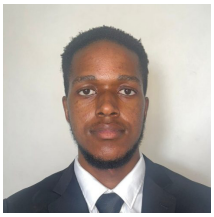

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