

## **School Readiness and Community-Based Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres in Low-Income Communities: Examining The Case of Gugulethu, Western Cape Province, South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

A child must be exposed to early learning situations and assisted in developing the skills and ways of functioning to develop, thrive, and be ready for school. It is established that poor school readiness preparation (SRP) negatively impacts subsequent learning outcomes. A qualitative study was conducted in Gugulethu, a poor community in the Western Cape province in South Africa, to determine how Early Childhood Development centres in a poor community prepare children for schooling. The study involved a sample of 12 community-based ECD centres. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with direct role-players, including principals, practitioners, and ECD industry key informants. Data was enriched through direct observation of operations at each facility. The study found that all the community-based ECD centres struggle to provide quality SRP. Contributing factors include limited ECD practitioner training, education resources, infrastructure, and facility management. Because these conditions relate to poverty, they affect the SRP of most children in poorer communities, such as Gugulethu, who tend to only have access to under-resourced ECD centres. The study concludes that, given the appalling performance of South Africa's basic education system, the government has to accept that improving its learning outcomes begins with vastly improving the SRP of children from birth.

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Development Centre; Early Learning; Gugulethu; School Readiness Preparation; Western Cape*



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### **INTRODUCTION**

No child merely grows into school readiness – a young child must be exposed to early learning situations and assisted by others to develop the necessary skills and ways of functioning to thrive and be ready for school by the start of Grade 1 (Janse van Rensburg, 2015). School readiness refers to the state of the child's competence, identified through various skills and traits required from learners when entering school for the first time. For instance, they should be able to complete tasks independently, adhere to a strict class routine and acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills (Li-Grining et al., 2010). School readiness preparation (SRP) is delivered in two settings, the home and an Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre. Parents rely on ECD centres to provide Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) services that place children on an early educational trajectory for school readiness (Bakken et al., 2017; Biersteker et al., 2016), expose many children to their first formal agent of socialization (Morillo Morales, & Cornips, 2022) and improve cognitive language development and mathematical and literacy skills (Biersteker et al., 2016). Quality ECD lays a solid foundation for a child's holistic and integrated education, reducing educational and social wastage and forming the foundation of all future linguistic, socio-emotional and cognitive development (Githinji & Kanga, 2011). Further, quality ECD provides the cognitive and non-

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cognitive stimulation that forms part of children's holistic development (Waldfoegel, 2015) and is crucial for school readiness.

In South Africa, 49% of new Grade 1 child may be inadequately prepared to transition into the formal schooling environment (Janse van Rensburg, 2015). According to the 2019 General Household Survey (GHS), only about 37% of South African children aged 0–4 years attend ECD centres or other educational and childcare arrangements (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Many ECD centres are reportedly inadequate and of poor quality due to poor infrastructure (Atmore et al., 2012; DSD, 2014; Madyibi & Bayat, 2021), unqualified ECD staff (Independent Online, 2022), or limited teaching and learning resources (Bayat & Madyibi, 2021; Richter & Samuels, 2018).

The national Department of Basic Education (DBE) introduced the National Early Learning Standards (NELDS) in 2009. The NELDS is a useful guide for ECD practitioners (ECDPs), and parents that support SRP (Sherry & Draper, 2013), principally by stipulating age-specific developmental outcomes children should achieve through early learning (DBE, 2009; Ebrahim, 2014; Matjokana, 2021). While implementing the NELDS would improve children's early learning through holistic child-centred practices for optimal development, it is apparent that many ECD centres are simply unable to. A larger challenge to the capacity of ECD centres appeared in 2015 when the DBE published the South African National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for children from Birth to Four (DBE, 2015). The NCF is the ECD sector curriculum built on the NELDS.

Views of school readiness converge on a central argument that children's skills at school entry strongly correlate with later skills (Hjetland et al., 2017; Suggate et al., 2018). Children who are poorly prepared for school in the early years tend to struggle later. Further, studies suggest that simply holding back learners (not advancing them to the next grade) does not lead to sustained positive outcomes (Buckmaster, 2019; Davis, 2021) but instead reduces their self-esteem and willingness to learn. Intervening earlier to improve SRP and prevent future learner failure is called for, yet school readiness studies in South Africa (Janse van Rensburg, 2015; Pretorius & Naude, 2002; Wildschut et al., 2016) seem to focus on assessment at reception year (Grade R) or Grade 1 level, while little is known about support for readiness before the Foundation Phase of schooling. It is critical that factors influencing children's school readiness before they start primary school be investigated, understood, and addressed.

In seeking to explore and understand the capacity of selected community-based ECD centres in Gugulethu to impart early learning skills and ready children for formal schooling, this paper pursues the following objectives:

1. Examine the views and understanding of school readiness of key stakeholders, including the incorporation of the NELDS and school readiness.
2. Investigate the extent to which the Gugulethu community ECD centres' environment and infrastructure are conducive to the SRP of children aged 0–4.
3. Recommend measures to strengthen Gugulethu community-based ECD centres' school readiness provision.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

What is School Readiness?

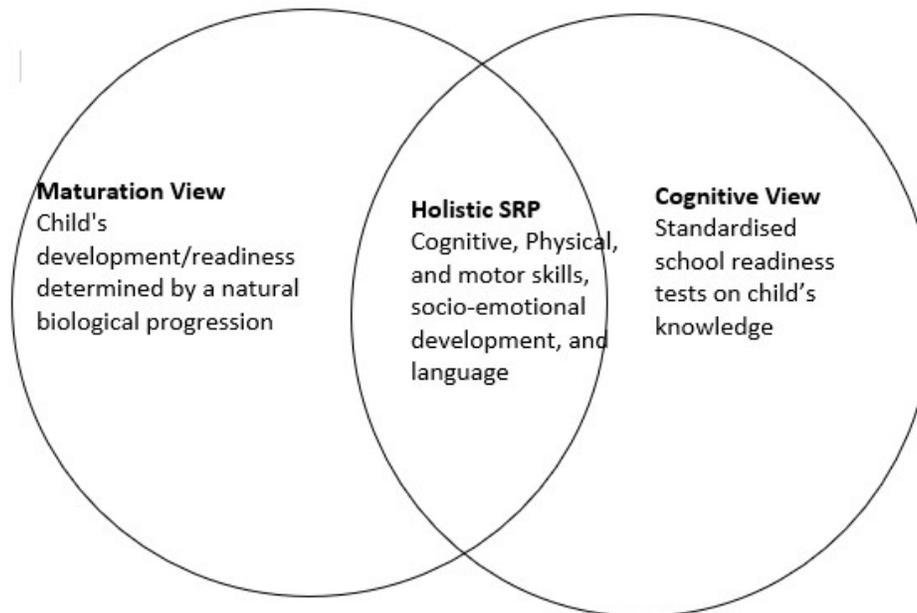


Figure 1. Views of School Readiness

According to Amod and Heafield (2013), early theorists advocated two narrow, reductionist views on school readiness: the maturational point of view and an empirical standpoint based on a child's knowledge. The maturational view was mooted by Arnold Gesell (1933), who argued that development follows an orderly sequence, with the rate of development determined by each child's distinctive genetic makeup. Although acknowledging the role of the environment in child development, Gesell never emphasized it (Thelen & Adolph, 1994) but argued that a child's development was determined by a natural biological progression.

The second view was associated with a series of standardised school readiness tests that tested children's knowledge of shapes, colours, counting, reciting the alphabet, and behavioural skills (Amod & Heafield, 2013). These have been critiqued as limiting and inaccurate measures to determine the complex socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical competencies that children need to succeed in school (Amod & Heafield, 2013).

The literature on school readiness has shifted to embrace a more holistic approach. For instance, school readiness tests are no longer used in isolation but integrate the conduciveness of the preschool and the influence and views of parents/caregivers and teachers (Amod & Heafield, 2013). These aspects of development are deemed prerequisites for a child's success in the formal schooling curriculum (De Witt et al., 2020). These development spheres manifest in a child's ability to adapt to increased academic, physical, and motor demands; adequate socio-emotional development; and ability to adapt to different approaches to learning, language, and cognitive ability (De Witt et al., 2020). Upon acquiring school

readiness skills, including reading, numeracy, social, motor, emotional, and self-care skills, a child enters formal schooling with ease and competence, without emotional complexity (Pekdogan & Akgül, 2017).

This paper considers that holistic SRP encompasses all these elements: academic/cognitive, physical and motor skills, adequate socio-emotional development, and language (De Witt et al., 2020). A child who successfully develops in these areas is adequately prepared to cope with learning in a formal school system (De Witt et al., 2020; Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

#### Effects of Early Education and School Readiness

Early learning provides a firm foundation for later school success (Mann et al., 2017). Bakken et al. (2017) found that ECD learners in a study in the United States of America (USA) developed social skills that expanded as they grew. By the time the children approached the fifth grade, they were increasingly displaying appropriate behaviours, establishing relationships, interacting socially, and responding to stimuli in an emotionally mature manner (Bakken et al., 2017). Children who enter elementary grades with greater social skills often develop more positive attitudes toward school and experience greater success in adjusting to school, in addition to better grades and higher achievement (Gustavsen, 2017). Mann et al. (2016) found that early maths skills and reading were the best predictors of academic achievement, while other scholars found social skills alone were not a predictor of later academic achievement (Blair, 2002; Rao et al., 2014). In South Africa, Munthali et al. (2014) found that children who had participated in early childhood education and related programs generally remain in school, are unlikely to repeat classes, and their class performance is much better than those who never attended pre-primary programmes.

Children require physical well-being and adequate energy levels to be ready to learn. These are usually promoted through motor skills development and good nutrition (Sherry & Draper, 2013). Physical activity programmes provide young children with the environment for motor skill development, with motor skills being the foundation of physical activity during the early and successive years.

Early learning is especially vital when dealing with the worst effects of poverty and may be an effective way to break vicious generational cycles of poverty (Letseka, 2012). Supporting early learning services and programmes for young children offers among the most promising approaches to alleviating poverty and achieving social and economic equity (Belfield et al., 2021; Hall & Woolard, 2012).

#### Enabling or Hindering Environment for School Readiness

In South Africa, ECD centres remain the dominant foundational early learning spaces. ECD centres may be registered with the Department of Social Development (DSD) and partially subsidised, conditionally registered (pending improved compliance with set standards), or unregistered. Disparities in resources persist along socioeconomic lines as community-based facilities, whether registered or not, tend to be more poorly resourced than private, affluent, and public school-based centres (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019; Mbarathi et al., 2016). The quality deteriorates even further when children are younger and poorer (Biersteker, 2012).

South Africa's ECD infrastructure is generally lacking. Mostly unregistered centres are likely to be built with poor quality non-permanent materials (Bidwell et al., 2014) and are often overcrowded, which inhibits learning and teaching (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019; Van der Walt et al., 2014). Under-resourced centres often have inadequate access to water and sanitation (Bidwell et al., 2014; Van der Walt et al., 2014). Poor ECD infrastructure can impact children's safety and health, leading to poor ECD service

provision (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019; Makhubele & Baloyi, 2018). Hence, Kotzé (2015) argues that poorly resourced facilities will likely function more as child-minding facilities than learning facilities.

One of the factors impacting school readiness is the competence of practitioners and principals. The DBE commissioned the Early Childhood Development (ECD) 2021 Census, which collected data from 42 420 ECD centres and early learning programmes. While the number of ECD centres had increased from 19 971 in 2013, when the last national ECD audit was conducted for the DSD, it was discovered that nearly a quarter of the practitioners and managerial staff did not have the required ECD training and qualifications (Independent Online, 2022). The overwhelming majority of ECD centre managers are in their positions as owners of the facilities rather than because they are formally qualified or trained as principals.

### Theoretical Perspectives

James Heckman and others (Cunha et al., 2005; Schweinhart et al., 2005) contend that disadvantaged children can not only overcome their initial deprivation and thrive in life through investment in human capital formation (that is, investment in skills and abilities) from birth to age five, but this would result in the highest rate of economic returns in adulthood. The process of capital formation is governed by a multi-stage technology within which some stages, called sensitive stages, are considered more effective in producing specific capabilities. It is highly recommended that specific skills be cultivated during the sensitive period, as skills in one period are prerequisites for the next stage (Heckman, 2007; Heckman & Corbin, 2016). The process of learning is interlinked so that capabilities produced in one stage enhance capabilities attained at later stages. This is explained through the principles of self-productivity and complementarity (Cunha & Heckman, 2007). Self-productivity ensures that skills produced at one stage enhance the skills attained at later stages so that the process of acquiring skills is self-reinforcing. What is learned today enables one to learn another more complex skill in the future (Cunha et al., 2005). The principle of complementarity states that skills produced at one stage will raise the productivity of investments at subsequent stages. Implicitly, an early investment has to be followed by later investments to enhance the productivity of the initial investment (Cunha et al., 2005). Thus, a child who has attended early education is likely to perform better in subsequent grades, having benefited from capital formation, but will perform even better if the investment is followed by others in all tiers of education.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Method

This study employed a qualitative methodology. The purpose of qualitative research is to comprehend the settings of individuals or groups and the circumstances in which their viewpoints or practices are situated (O'Brien et al., 2014). It provides in-depth, explorative, descriptive data that cannot be captured quantitatively (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Thus, this study investigates the unique viewpoints and experiences of ECD stakeholders in understanding and implementing SRP.

### Study contextual setting

Gugulethu is situated in the City of Cape Town metropolitan municipality. It shares the characteristics of a classic South African Black township born in the Apartheid era, of rows of identical small houses, mushrooming informal settlements, no nature areas, and few recreational amenities, with churches among the few prominent features of the built environment (Teppo & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2013). The early learning to foundational age cohort of 0–9 years constitutes 19% of the total population of the community (City of Cape Town, 2015).

#### Targeting and sampling

The first author received a list of 36 community-based ECD centres in Gugulethu from the Department of Social Development-appointed ECD centre coordinator in Gugulethu. From this list, 12 ECD centres were purposively selected. The focus was on children aged 0–4 years as this age range encompasses a critical stage of child development. The selection of nine principals and 27 Early Childhood Development Practitioners (ECDPs) at the sampled ECD centres was purposive and convenient as these principals and ECDPs were easily accessible at the ECD centres.

The study included three ECD key informants to enrich the range of perspectives obtained: one official from the Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU), a Non-governmental organisation (NGO) that oversees operations and registrations of ECD centres in the province; an ECD organisational programme coordinator from another NGO, the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD); and a Gugulethu ECD centre coordinator. The study thus involved nine principals, 27 ECDPs, and three key informants.

#### Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the principals and the key informants. After an interview with the principal at each centre was conducted, observations of the ECD facility followed, including an hour of lesson observation per class of children aged 0–4 years. Aspects of the Quality of Early Childhood Care Tool (QUEST) (Goodson et al., 2005) and the DSD National Norms and Standards for ECD centres were considered to develop an observation guide for case study observations. The key informant interviews explored their understanding of SRP incorporation in early learning and governmental expectations in teaching and learning.

The ECDPs' involvement was through focus group discussions, which have been acknowledged as an efficient means of collecting data from multiple sources (Kothari, 2004). The focus group discussions proved to be a resourceful, interactive way of collecting information that allowed ECDPs to reflect collectively on their work.

ECD Interviews with principals were conducted at their convenience; hence prior arrangements were made to meet in the morning or afternoon at the ECD centres. On the other hand, focus groups with the practitioners were consistently conducted during the preschoolers' nap time between 12 and 2 pm to avoid disrupting class sessions and daily programmes. Interviews were approximately one hour long, while the focus groups were about 1,5 hours. Each ECD centre had at least three practitioners and some volunteers; therefore, one focus group was conducted in each centre, resulting in nine focus group sessions. Data collection started in September 2021 to February 2022. The core questions on school readiness, such as SRP application and professional development support, were asked of both practitioners and ECD principals. Moreover, the study utilised diverse data collection instruments, namely focus groups, interviews, and observations, to achieve rigour.

#### Ethics consideration

Before proceeding with the research, ethical approval was obtained from the research committees of the University of Western Cape (UWC) and the DSD.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Theme 1: Understanding School Readiness

The ECDPs, principals, and key informants were asked to articulate their understanding of the concept of SRP. The key informants and principals demonstrated a good understanding of the multiple facets of SRP:

*Stimulation of a child happens emotionally, physically, intellectually, and socially. Those are the four areas in which children have to be stimulated if we want the child to prosper later on in school. – Key informant.*

*The child must be well developed mentally, emotionally, physically, and socially and you can see this development when the child is playing with educational toys...we observe how they play with building blocks, pretend kitchen, and other knowledge. – Principal, Facility 9 (registered).*

*A child may know how to speak, greet, and interact with others in peace and be accountable when they do something wrong. – Principal, Facility 23 (unregistered).*

However, only 26% (n=7/27) of the ECDPs viewed school readiness as a multi-dimensional concept comprising cognitive, non-cognitive, and physical development. The differences in comprehension of SRP between principals and ECDPs show that communication of the long-term vision of ECD has not filtered down to centre activities with children and may indicate that the NELDs standards have not been implemented well enough to enable a wider understanding of linkages between ECD and SRP.

#### 1. Timing of SRP

Regarding when SRP should be employed, only a few principals (n=2) and ECDPs (n=8) concurred on an early start to SRP, that is, before the age of four years.

*Our school readiness preparation begins from the nought to two years group because children learn from what they see and manipulate an object; nothing comes from the minds on its own. – Principal, Facility 11 (unregistered).*

*Early learning starts one to two years and increases with age groups. – Practitioner, Facility 3 (conditionally registered).*

*I work with 0 to 18 months children, and in my class, I teach them to count from 0 to 5. I let them scribble on paper so that they know how to grasp crayons for writing. If we are painting, I let them finger paint so that when they go to the next class, they know the basics; even if they can't talk yet, I sing to them so that they know songs and try to sing – that way improving their language. – Practitioner, Facility 12 (conditionally registered).*

These respondents' understanding aligns with the theories of Froebel, Erikson, Vygotsky, and Piaget and the postulation that learning in the first 1 000 days of human life is sustained through social interaction (Biersteker, 2012) and exposing children to early interaction in a preschool setting increases their future ability to cope with schooling.

The contextual influence could be the reason that most respondents didn't mention the importance of early SRP. In the South African context, early exposure to SRP has had a slow progression. A key informant indicated that the South African ECD sector only recently began shifting from beginning SRP at the reception year (Grade R) to including 0–4-year-old children. This slow transition is reflected in the government's yet-to-be-implemented commitment to introduce two years of pre-Grade 1 classes, which Hall et al. (2019) argue ignores the prevailing view in the ECD sector that a child's brain is most responsive

to cognitive and non-cognitive development in the 0–3 years of age period. Indeed, several studies have shown that preparing children for schooling only during the reception year is inadequate (De Witt et al., 2020; Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

## 2. NCF, NELDS, and School Readiness

The NELDS guides ECDPs on age-specific developmental outcomes to achieve to ensure that children reach full development and learning capacity (DBE, 2009; Ebrahim, 2014; Matjokana, 2021). The NELDS is arguably the most informative policy document on SRP. Along with the NCF, it forms the basis of national ECD and early learning policy. Despite this, only three principals mentioned the use of the NCF and NELDS in their ECD work. Since the key informants in this study indicated that the NCF had not been adequately implemented, the principals' and ECDPs' limited knowledge of SRP and related policy development were unsurprising.

### Theme 2: Factors influencing implementation of SRP in key developmental areas

According to the South African ECD policy guidelines, quality ECCE is mainly determined by the quality of inputs such as physical infrastructure, learning programme, group size, teacher-child ratio, the presence of developmentally appropriate education equipment, materials, and resources, governance and management (Atmore 2019, p. 29). These factors also determine the implementation of SRP. Even if the principals and ECDPs understood school readiness, they need these enabling factors to execute SRP. This study found that the ability of community-based ECD centres in Gugulethu to incorporate key developmental areas of SRP is highly determined by the ECDPs' training and, competence, Resourcing. Infrastructural conduciveness for SRP.

#### 1. ECDPs' training and competence

A considerable number (n=15/27) of the ECDPs in the study teaching children aged 0–3 years did not have the required minimum Level 1 ECD qualification. Some of the ECDPs of children aged 0–2 years old were unaware that the basic ECD qualification was a prerequisite to practice. Ten ECDPs said that they had been on the waiting list for enrolment in TVET college courses for years. Most ECDPs (n=15/27) relied on unaccredited workshops provided by ELRU, the DSD, and Grassroots (another well-established NGO involved in ECDP training). According to Van der Walt et al. (2014), less intensive, low-dosed, delayed, or mono-systemic ECD teaching training is less effective. Moreover, some ECDPs reported that it was not always possible to leave their centres to attend these ad hoc training services.

Underqualified ECDPs are less likely to be able to effectively deliver SRP techniques. Observation of the ECDPs teaching children aged 0–2 years across the ECD centres showed little evidence of teaching fundamentals, such as the importance of allowing independent learning through informal play (Zosh et al., 2017). These observations seem to confirm ECDPs' lack of sufficient training and ability in the NCF/NELDS curriculum that would ensure SRP progressively occurs at each developmental stage.

#### 2. Resources

##### a. Inadequate human resource capacity

The DSD-set standard for the teacher: class ratio is 1:20 children per class for ages 3–4 years and 1:30 for 5–6 years (Atmore, 2013). This study was conducted during school holiday times when older siblings were assigned to look after the children, reducing the attendance of children at ECD centres. The study also took place during the COVID-19 pandemic when most parents weren't working and kept their

children at home. The average ECDP-to-child ratio of 1:26 across all age groups established in the study was, therefore, quite high.

High ECDP-to-child ratios indicate inadequate numbers of ECDPs. Further, a lack of support negatively impacts ECDPs' ability to teach adequately. The majority (n=20/27) of the ECDPs did not have assistants or volunteers. Observations of lessons revealed a lack of management skills when dealing with oversized classes. For example, ECDPs supervising large groups of unruly children struggled to maintain order, and tasks depicted on their daily schedules weren't accomplished. Attending large groups of children reduces ECDPs' attention to individuals and may cause them to miss children's specific school readiness needs. Moreover, ECDPs are more likely to stress or burn out (Moodley, 2001).

b. Availability of resources

The availability, quality, and adequacy of materials varied across the centres. Most of the ECD centres were equipped with child-scaled tables, chairs, toilets, and potties. In some centres, classrooms were mainly set up with tables and chairs for four-year-old children and were not used by younger children. In others, stacks of age-appropriate chairs were observed that were unused due to lack of space. Lack of donations and sponsorships, burglaries, and thefts were cited as reasons for shortages of resources in some ECD centres (n=5/12).

*We operate in a poverty-stricken community where people will do anything to get by, so every month, our ECD centres encounter burglaries. They take learning materials to sell at scrapyards, and we have to start looking for ways to replace those materials again.* – ECD coordinator.

*We get burglaries every week, and I have to use the money to repair every time there is a breakage, police always take forensic evidence, but nothing gets solved. Even parents see how I endure this trouble because I love looking after children.* – Principal, Facility 31 (registered).

*Burglaries – the toys, learning material, furniture, the alarm system, and electricity box, they stole them all* – Practitioner, Facility 31 (registered).

Most ECD centres are funded by private donors and parents and cannot replace resources that are stolen or damaged.

One practitioner noted that they were even less equipped to assist children with special needs.

*We are not equipped to work with special needs children; the only thing we can do is to include those children so that they can at least have that classroom experience.* – Practitioner, Facility 22 (unregistered).

c. Learning and teaching materials (LTSM)

Although a key informant indicated that centres in Gugulethu did not have challenges with learning materials, several ECD centres (n=7/12) in the study used old and outdated materials. Most of the books used were seven years old except at two ECD centres whose principals had respectively secured sponsorships from a private company and Montessori Centre South Africa. Although toys were available in classes, there were either too few to share among large classes or they were old and broken. All the ECD centres in the study prioritised the allocation of the best LTSM to the classes of children aged between four and five years, while the younger children made do with whatever remained. Limited LTSM in ECD centres may negatively influence SRP as the delivery of ECD programmes depends on the availability of quality materials (Mbarathi et al., 2016). The participants appeared to share this view.

*The DBE provided the curriculum; without the resources we cannot prepare children for schooling. We need boards, chalks, and books that children can take home for practice because handling homework will be a common practice in school.* – Principal (conditionally registered).

*The materials and books we have were published seven years ago, and we don't have edited versions, so we work with outdated content. We don't have any guiding material that helps us plan for the year so that we know by the end of the year what we should have taught the children, so we are left to do our own research on what to do with the children.* – Practitioner, Facility 5 (registered).

*But the problem is the resources we have here are limited, unlike at the school, they will have all the books that we don't have here for each and every child. Also, at the school, they are given books to take home and practice, so here we only practice at the crèche. DBE only gives us the curriculum, not resources.* – Principal, Facility 3 (conditionally registered).

The lack of quality LTSM impacts quality SRP and has been observed in both the province and nationally. Kotzé (2015) indicated that one in every five centres in the Western Cape lacks basic LTSM. The South African ECD centres audit indicated that the lack of resources was common in most registered facilities (DSD, 2014). Although the DBE's NCF curriculum supports synergy between preschool teaching and Foundation Phase teaching, the use of this curriculum is significantly affected by the lack of adequate LTSM. As the principal of Facility 3 succinctly put it: *"DBE only gives us the curriculum, not resources."*

### 3. Infrastructural conduciveness for SRP

The study examined both the outdoor and indoor environments at the ECD centres. The outside space was explored in terms of safety, space, and hygiene. The main finding was that none of the centres, regardless of their registration status, met all the infrastructural requirements for indoor and outdoor spaces. This finding concurs with Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019) and Makhubele and Baloyi (2018), who found that South African township ECD facilities lack proper infrastructure. Most buildings serving as ECD facilities are dilapidated, unsecured, and often unsafe. Observations confirmed that very few (n=2/12) ECD centres in the study had a functional outdoor space for play. Most (n=10/12) had limited space for outdoor play and seemed overcrowded. Very few ECD centres' outdoor areas were equipped with outdoor play equipment such as jungle gyms for older children, plastic bikes, hula hoops, and slides.

*Since we had to reduce the number of children, my worry is that a lot of children now roam the streets, as they don't have anywhere to go because caregivers do not want to take their children to any other crèche; they want this crèche.* – Principal, Facility 12 (conditionally registered).

*I don't have space here...my classrooms are very small. And parents want to enroll here, but I can't take them all; I have been told by DSD to reduce the number of children.* – Principal, Facility 3 (conditionally registered).

*I don't have outside play space for them to run around, so I will speak to the owner of the space at the back so that they give me the space for me to extend the outside play area. Due to lack of space, our physical development is a bit limited. I can't arrange the little ones' space into different activities corners such as fantasy play corners, book corners, etc.* – Principal, Facility 11 (unregistered).

The lack of space limits the centres' ability to pursue the pillars of school readiness, such as physical development. It also presents challenges to hygiene and safety. For example, at two centres, cleaning chemicals and equipment, and used potties were stored within reach of children.

## Discussion

While some principals showed an informed understanding of school readiness, 26% of the ECDPs could not articulate the different facets of SRP, and most believed SRP should occur later. This contrasts with the consensus in the sector that basic child development begins during early learning long before school-going age. Heckman and Corbin (2016) have argued that it is not economically and socially efficient for societies to wait until children show signs of incompetence before intervening. Moreover, the Heckman curve shows that the rate of return on public investment in human capital, including early education, diminishes with age (Rea & Burton, 2020). It has even been proposed that skills gaps in adulthood develop between advantaged and disadvantaged children before they start schooling (Heckman & Corbin, 2016). Hence, the challenges of SRP ought to be addressed in preschool, not in primary school.

Lack of SRP is also linked to the rates of grade repetition and dropout. Grade repetition in Grade 1 South Africa is estimated to be about 17% (Business Tech, 2020). The DBE has conceded that up to 50% of children starting Grade 1 may not complete schooling until Grade 12. One of the main reasons for dropping out is being unable to perform academically at school (Business Tech, 2020). This lack of competence is often a consequence of the early years of underdevelopment, and it has been argued that early deficits become increasingly hard to undo (Heckman & Corbin, 2016).

One of the biggest barriers to implementing SRP at ECD centres in Gugulethu is the lack, by more than half of the ECDPs, of an ECD qualification. Chandra (2021), among others, has pointed out that training determines how well SRP is incorporated in ECD. In this study, ECDPs' low educational attainment is a vicious circle: they earn little because they are unqualified while studying full-time means forfeiting the little they currently earn. Classes are overcrowded and understaffed, affecting teaching quality and inhibiting SRP. A general lack of resources includes a lack of Learning and Teaching Support Material (LTSM) and play equipment due to poverty, limited sponsorships, and crime. The lack of resources results in ECD centres prioritising older children and reducing the prospects of SRP for younger children.

## CONCLUSION

The study found that all of the community-based ECD centres struggle to provide quality SRP. Contributing factors include limited ECD practitioner training, education resources, infrastructure, and facility management. Because these conditions relate to poverty, they affect the SRP of most children in poorer communities, such as Gugulethu, who tend to only have access to under-resourced ECD centres. The study further recommends that

1. ECDPs working with children aged 0–2 years need to be better trained to understand and implement the basic concepts of SRP, although training must be accompanied by improved access to resources.
2. The community-based ECD centres in Gugulethu require considerable support within an enabling environment to deliver quality SRP. This could include more involvement of the private and NGO sectors to initiate funding and investment in ECD centres to upgrade them to DSD standards, with concomitant access to registration and government subsidies that will improve their sustainability.

## LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

The research sample was obtained from a list of ECD centres whose principals were members of the Gugulethu ECD principals' forum. This excluded many ECD centres in the Gugulethu community from being considered for sampling, although the research sample would still have been small. It is possible that a larger or more wide-ranging sample could have amended the picture obtained of the community's contextual situation. Another factor influencing selection was that most of the unregistered centres were

not reachable at the contact numbers available, excluding them from possible selection for the study. Parents are integral role players in fostering SRP. Further research could investigate ways parents may promote SRP among their children timeously, especially in low-income areas such as Gugulethu.

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