Closing the gap in South Africa’s early learning provision:
The case for a national delivery platform
Executive summary

Universal access to a comprehensive package of early childhood development (ECD) services must be achieved quickly if we are to improve outcomes for children at population-level in South Africa. The size of the challenge is significant. An estimated 1.24 million 3–5½ year-old children are not attending an early learning programme or are attending inappropriate provision, or their attendance is unknown. Of these, over 920 000 are poor children (in quintiles 1 and 2). This means that poor children constitute 75% of the total provisioning gap. In other words, children who are most in need are most likely to miss out.

In order to close this gap and achieve universal access for all three- to five-year-olds, over 100 000 new early learning practitioners and assistants are needed, and over 40 000 new venues. By implication, without a human resource pipeline and sufficient venues for early learning programmes, it will be impossible to improve access for children. What is more, in order to reach the high numbers of excluded children, system capacity must be expanded at an unprecedented rate in a relatively short timeframe.

Even where early learning programmes do exist, quality is highly variable. This is significant, because research suggests that children generally only benefit from attendance at early learning programmes if a certain level of quality is provided. The issue of quality tends to be linked to poverty. Both registered and unregistered early learning programmes in poor communities are more likely to have inadequate play and learning materials and to be provided by practitioners with little or no training.

Lack of equity in quality and access is essentially a structural problem. In South Africa, the provision of early learning (before school) is market-led and dominated by private providers. The government’s ECD subsidy works imperfectly as a mechanism for ensuring fairness for all children. Interventions by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are usually not joined up, and they are not based on population-level planning. Furthermore, the economics of these interventions generally do not work at scale. Programmes with high or even medium unit costs would quickly become unaffordable if rolled out nationally.

On the other hand, there is a massive pool of untapped human capital in South Africa. Early learning programmes have the potential to create direct employment and support micro-enterprise development for women in particular. There is also an exciting opportunity to support the expansion of early learning programmes using existing premises, including homes – meaning that scaling is not slowed down or made unaffordable by thousands of building projects.

The government has set the goal of achieving universal access to ECD by 2030, including a compulsory pre-Grade R year (‘Grade RR’). This type of population-level change requires a population-level intervention. It is unlikely to be achieved by simply extending current approaches, which generally have not been designed for either maximum reach or maximum service integration. In addition, the fact that these approaches have not expanded to either meet or stimulate demand at the scale needed, suggests that we will have to look beyond the status quo.

In order to reach the high numbers of excluded children, system capacity needs to grow at an unprecedented rate.
What is needed instead is a systems intervention which can close the provisioning gap in two ways: First, by integrating every stage on the service delivery continuum; and second, by providing the architecture and systems for establishing and managing programmes at scale. This type of national delivery platform offers a new way of thinking about the provision of early learning. It solves both the human resource and venue dilemmas, by linking the challenges of recruitment and training with the operationalisation and resourcing of new programmes in a variety of existing premises, including homes.

Crucially, in areas where ECD NGOs are already active, a national delivery platform acts as an equal partner, harnessing their experience and assets, linking up their contributions and providing the systems for growth. In areas where NGOs currently have no coverage, the platform seeds new NGOs or provides the full service spectrum directly itself. This means that the platform can plan for and ensure equitable coverage because the provision of new places is not vulnerable to the significant variations in the presence of other service providers in any particular area.

A national early learning delivery platform is not simply a bigger NGO or service. It is a new approach which is designed at the outset for scale, and provides the operational architecture that enables it to keep expanding until all children are reached. In particular, in the South African context, a successful national delivery platform needs to:

- establish a practitioner recruitment system with accessible entry-points;
- provide a managed and safe process for onboarding new venues using existing premises, including private homes;
- provide a locally appropriate curriculum that can realistically be implemented in a wide range of resource-constrained settings;
- not ‘train and leave’ but hold practitioners in a system of support and development;
- have robust quality assurance systems across the network;
- hold unit costs low; and
- align to and support regulatory compliance.

SmartStart is South Africa’s first full-service early learning delivery platform. Under a social franchise model, implementing partners (‘Franchisors’) license and support early learning practitioners to deliver the same evidence-based programme for three- to five-year-olds. The programme is supported by operational tools and play materials; a network of ‘Clubs’; and training, licensing and quality assurance processes implemented by a national team of Coaches. Recruitment and community activation systems help to stimulate both the supply and demand sides.

In the five years since set-up, the social franchise model has enabled SmartStart to reach over 75 000 children. In 2019, an independent evaluation of the progress of 199 children attending 69 SmartStart programmes confirmed that it was achieving positive outcomes for children. Using the standardised Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) tool, the researchers found that 62% of children were achieving the expected standard for their age at endline, compared to 32% at baseline.
Universal access to a comprehensive package of early childhood development (ECD) services must be achieved, as are inappropriate provision, or their attendance is unknown. Of these, over 920,000 are poor children. An estimated 1.24 million 3–5-year-old children, of whom 70%, are not attending early learning programmes using existing premises, including homes—meaning that scaling is not slowed down or made easier. On the other hand, there is a massive pool of untapped human capital in South Africa. Early learning (before school) is market-led and dominated by private providers. The government’s ECD subsidy is significant. An estimated 1.24 million 3–5-year-old children are most in need are most likely to miss out.

Even where early learning programmes do exist, in poor communities are more likely to have inadequate play and learning materials and to be provided by poorly trained practitioners and assistants, rather than the professional early learning practitioners and assistants needed, and over 40,000 new venues. By implication, without a national delivery platform, it will be impossible to improve educational and wider outcomes for South Africa’s children. This is what a national early learning delivery platform would achieve.

SmartStart has shown what is possible, and as government incentives align with provider interests, a number of early learning delivery platforms could emerge. Government can accelerate this process by configuring the design of a new national early learning commissioning system around these types of platforms for scale. This in turn will help to transition the funding of a critical basic service for children from the philanthropic sector to the state.

In other words, placing national early learning delivery platforms at the heart of a national strategy for scale aligns the interests and capabilities of government, funders, NGOs and ECD providers in such a way as to make possible the government’s pledge of universal access to ECD for every child. And when the starting point of the entire Grade R cohort moves forward, benefits will be felt at systems level in schools, meaning that population-level change in educational and wider outcomes will be realised.

When the starting point of the entire Grade R cohort moves forward, outcomes and efficiencies improve across the whole schooling system.
1. Introduction

Universal access to a comprehensive package of ECD services must be achieved quickly if we are to shift educational outcomes at population-level in South Africa. Population-level change refers to a pattern of change that benefits everyone in the target group. This means that success is measured by the degree to which early child outcomes shift for all South African children and not just some. When the frame of reference is the entire population group rather than individual children, the pre-eminent concern becomes achieving equitable access to quality early learning in every community.

The size of the challenge is significant. In South Africa, there are over one million children aged three to five years old who are not accessing any form of early learning programme. Most of these children are from low-income households and live in poor communities. Among older pre-school children (five- to six-year-olds), the number of children not accessing any type of school or pre-school programme has stayed stubbornly around the 200 000 mark for the past ten years, illustrating the difficulties of achieving universal coverage in diverse geo-localities, even with increased political will and funding.

Services for early childhood development (ECD) include maternal and child health care, support for parenting and nutrition, social security and early learning. In this paper, early learning refers to the activities, interactions and experiences that support early language, numeracy and cognitive skills, as well as fine and gross motor development. It also encompasses executive function skills – such as self-control, perseverance and memory – that are essential tools for living and learning. Each of these developmental areas requires an environment that actively nurtures a child’s curiosity, empathy, communication and imagination, as well as their overall well-being.

Many factors have combined to confound efforts to create equitable access to early learning in South Africa. There are no mechanisms for delivery at scale (in particular, systems for large-scale recruitment and for operationalising new sites) and no population-level planning. The early learning landscape is intrinsically fragmented, and different types of service are often not joined up. Parents do not receive good quality information on the importance of early learning, and for many families the available provision is unaffordable. Government’s role has evolved as a largely reactive one, trying to regulate what is already there, and therefore tending towards being constraining rather than enabling. These factors together have led to the current situation of latent demand, patchy coverage and variable quality. Worst of all, children who are most in need are most likely to miss out.

In response, the government has set the goal of achieving universal access to ECD by 2030, including a compulsory pre-Grade R year (‘Grade RR’). This type of population-level change requires a population-level intervention. It is unlikely to be achieved by simply extending current approaches, which generally have not been designed for either maximum reach or maximum service integration. In addition, the fact that these approaches have not expanded to either meet or stimulate demand at the scale needed, suggests that we need to look beyond the status quo.

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Instead, a systems intervention is needed which is sharply focused on increasing early learning system capacity while maintaining quality. System capacity refers to the availability of places in early learning programmes and has two critical components: practitioners and venues. Without a human resource pipeline and sufficient venues for early learning programmes, it will be impossible to improve access for children. What is more, in order to reach the high numbers of excluded children, system capacity must be expanded at an unprecedented rate, bringing on board tens of thousands of new practitioners and new venues in a short timeframe.

The early learning provisioning gap is the shortfall in system capacity – the difference between what is available and what is needed. ‘Needed’ in this sense encompasses every child within the age group, reflecting the call by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to take a rights-based approach to ECD service delivery. In South Africa, most recent data suggest that in order to achieve universal access for all three- to five-year-olds alone, over 100 000 new early learning practitioners and assistants are needed, and over 40 000 new venues.

A systems solution can help to close this provisioning gap in two ways: first, by integrating every stage on the early learning service delivery continuum; and second, by providing the architecture and systems for establishing and managing programmes at scale. This type of national delivery platform offers a new way of thinking about the provisioning of early learning. It solves both the human resource and venues dilemmas simultaneously, by linking the challenges of recruitment and training with the operationalisation and resourcing of new programmes in a variety of existing premises.

Crucially, a national delivery platform does not replace or compete with existing ECD service providers. Instead, it works as an equal partner with these providers, harnessing their experience and assets and linking up their contributions.

The diagram below illustrates how this type of approach can ensure a decisive step away from the entrenched inequalities in the current system. The column on the left shows what happens when all children can benefit from a medium-effect-size programme. The column on the right shows what happens when some children can benefit from a high-effect-size programme and some children receive nothing.

The diagram suggests that it is only by moving the starting point of the entire Grade R cohort forward that benefits will be felt at systems level in schools and that there will be population-level change in educational outcomes for South Africa’s children. This is what a national early learning delivery platform would achieve. There does not have to be only one such platform, but there must be at least one, and partnership with government, investors and others will be crucial.
In the diagram, the population-level intervention assumes 100% access to medium-effect-size programmes. The irregular coverage assumes c.50% access to high-effect-size programmes (in reality, current early learning programmes range from low- to high-effect sizes).
2. The early learning provisioning gap: Access and quality

There are two essential components of equity in early learning – access and quality. The efficient allocation of public resources requires that we optimise inputs to ensure both components. On the one hand, the quality of practitioner-child interactions should not be compromised as early learning programmes are taken to scale, even if services have to be delivered in simpler circumstances. On the other hand, it is important that public resources are not so concentrated into ‘high-touch/low-reach’ programmes that access is reduced for the wider population of children.

However, it is also important not to overplay the trade-offs between access at scale and quality – both are possible and in a properly designed system can be mutually reinforcing. At the same time, both can be either enabled or thwarted by similar factors, including affordability, public awareness, human resource development and sustainability.

2.1 The access picture in South Africa

Official government figures suggest that in 2018, access to early learning programmes was around 38% of all 0–4 year-olds, representing a small increase in each of the last five years. However, the picture for older pre-school children looks slightly different. For both four-year-olds and five-year-olds, there has been no improvement in access over the last three years, despite significant government attention and effort. In other words, it does not appear that supply is expanding organically to bridge the provisioning gap.

In this paper, we use the term ‘early learning programmes’ to refer collectively to ECD centres and non-centre-based ECD programmes, which are typically attended by children without their parent or caregiver present. These programmes include pre-schools, nurseries, playgroups, small and large home-based programmes, as well as Grade R classes.

The table below uses the General Household Survey 2018 (GHS 2018) to estimate the number of children aged between three years old and 5½ years old (the age by which they start Grade R) for whom new early learning places are needed. In addition to the nearly one million children in this age group who are known not to be attending any type of early learning programme, there are about 90 000 children whose attendance is unknown and an estimated 166 000 children who are probably not attending age-appropriate programmes (for example, attending a Grade R class aged four years old).

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The table does not include an estimate of the number of children who are in programmes where the child-adult ratio exceeds government requirements and is therefore likely to be an underestimate of the actual number of new places needed.

Endemic inequality

Lack of access affects some groups of children more than others. An analysis of GHS 2018 shows that the poorest three- to five-year-olds are two-and-a-half times more likely not to attend an early learning programme than the richest children in this age group. Over one-third of three- to five-year-olds in the lowest income quintile do not attend an early learning programme, compared to 14% of children in the highest income quintile (see Figure 2 below). Poorer children are also much more likely to be attending inappropriate provision (such as Grade R or 1 classes before they have turned five years old) than children in higher income households.

In total, an estimated 1.24 million 3–5½ year-old children either are not attending an early learning programme or are attending inappropriate provision, or their attendance/circumstances are unknown. Of these, over 920 000 are poor children (in quintiles 1 and 2). This means that poor children constitute 75 per cent of the total provisioning gap. It also means that the children who are most likely to benefit from ECD interventions are least likely to attend an early learning programme.

We also know that where children live matters and that children in some provinces have inferior access to early learning programmes. One quarter of all 0–4 year-olds in South Africa who are not accessing ECD programmes live in KwaZulu-Natal. Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal have the highest populations of young children, but attendance at early learning programmes is twice as high in Gauteng than in KwaZulu-Natal (50% versus 25%).

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Table 1: Estimated number of children aged 3–5½ years-old who are not attending ECD programmes, whose attendance is unknown or who are not in age-appropriate programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3 year-olds (36 to &lt;48 months)</th>
<th>4 year-olds (48 to &lt;60 months)</th>
<th>5½ year-olds (60 to &lt;66 months)</th>
<th>All children (aged 36 to &lt;66 months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not attending any ECD programme</td>
<td>519 687</td>
<td>368 079</td>
<td>97 382</td>
<td>985 148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>22 544</td>
<td>23 621</td>
<td>44 665</td>
<td>90 830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely attending inappropriate provision</td>
<td>17 168</td>
<td>110 036</td>
<td>38 981</td>
<td>166 185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>559 399</td>
<td>501 736</td>
<td>181 029</td>
<td>1 242 164</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the following categories in GHS 2018:

1. ‘None’
2. ‘Other’, ‘Unknown’, ‘Unspecified’
3. ‘Grade R’, ‘School’ for three- and four-year-olds, and ‘School’ for 5½ year-olds

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Children who are most likely to benefit from ECD interventions, are least likely to attend an early learning programme

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The 2014 Audit found that over half of existing ECD centres are run from existing premises. This is because density in these areas often means that building new facilities is less viable. This means that where ECD programmes are provided they are, of necessity, frequently run out of existing premises.

A key problem is the lack of entry-level qualifications to the profession. However, it is also a systems issue. The scale of recruitment and training required is unlikely to be delivered in the current ECD ‘market’ framework. It is estimated that over 100,000 new early learning practitioners and 40,000 more venues are required to achieve universal access for 3–5½ year-olds. Based on the number of new places that are needed, it can be estimated that over 40,000 new venues for early learning programmes will be required nationally by 2030 to achieve universal access for 3–5½ year-olds. This suggests that in the most under-serviced areas, there are more than 4,000 children to every ECD centre (based on all registered and unregistered centres identified in the 2014 audit by the Department of Social Development (DSD)). The ratio of children to centres is highest in parts of KwaZulu-Natal and also high in particular districts in the Eastern Cape and North West Province. The rural character of these areas and the more limited ‘customer’ base mean that it is often less financially viable to run an early learning programme. It is plausible that the stark difference in access rates between KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng is linked to the large difference in the proportion of 0–5 year-olds living in rural areas in each province (61% vs 3%).

System capacity
System capacity refers to the number of places available for children in ECD programmes. It has two main components: venues and ECD practitioners. Where one or both of these are lacking, it is not possible to expand capacity to reach more children.

In many parts of South Africa, there are simply not enough ECD programmes. Government statistics suggest that in the most under-serviced areas, there are more than 4,000 children to every ECD centre (based on all registered and unregistered centres identified in the 2014 audit by the Department of Social Development (DSD)). The ratio of children to centres is highest in parts of KwaZulu-Natal and also high in particular districts in the Eastern Cape and North West Province. The rural character of these areas and the more limited ‘customer’ base mean that it is often less financially viable to run an early learning programme. It is plausible that the stark difference in access rates between KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng is linked to the large difference in the proportion of 0–5 year-olds living in rural areas in each province (61% vs 3%).

It is estimated that over 100,000 new early learning practitioners and 40,000 more venues are required to achieve universal access for 3–5½ year-olds.

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The provisioning gap

Data on the current numbers of children not accessing early learning programmes can be used to model the provisioning gap in terms of early learning places, venues and practitioners for 3–5½ year-olds. The estimates in Table 3 give a sense of the scale of the challenge facing government and the ECD sector.

Table 2: South Africa’s ECD provisioning gap for 3–5½ year-olds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimated gap (for 3–5½ year-olds)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECD places¹</td>
<td>1 057 516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New ECD practitioners and assistants²</td>
<td>107 226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New ECD venues³</td>
<td>40 730</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Modelled using the following assumptions**

1. ECD places:
   - Access for 100% of 4½–5½ year-olds and 90% of 3–4½ year-olds.
   - 3 and 4 year-olds currently in Grade R or 1 classes move into age-appropriate provision.
   - Does not take into account children currently in too large classes – number unknown.

2. Practitioners and assistants:
   - Adult-child ratios as per Norms and Standards for ECD Programmes (including one assistant for every stipulated practitioner).
   - Modality split of 83% in full-week programmes comprising 45% in purpose-built ECD centres, 5% in community-type premises, 29% in large programmes in private homes, 4% in small programmes in private homes (<=6 children) and 11% in part-time programmes, comprising 8% in playgroups and 3% in mobile programmes.
   - Playgroup practitioners have two groups of 10 children each. Mobile practitioners have three groups of 15 children each.

3. Venues:
   - Purpose-built centres average three classrooms or separate spaces (based on DSD Audit 2014).
   - Community-type premises average 1.5 classrooms or separate spaces (based on DSD Audit).
   - For private homes and playgroups, one venue needed per practitioner.

Human resources

Human resources, in terms of an adequate pipeline of appropriately trained early learning practitioners, are an essential ingredient of both access and quality. New early learning programmes require people to staff them, and appropriate early learning activities require knowledgeable practitioners.

At the minimum stipulated adult-child ratios,⁶ over 100 000 more early learning practitioners and assistants are required for 3–5½ year-olds alone. This does not include principals and supervisors, nor the thousands of auxiliary staff needed such as administrators, cooks and cleaners. It also does not include the tens of thousands of early learning practitioners required for 0–2 year-olds.

The Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP-SETA) used Wazimap to estimate that there were 46 571 early learning practitioners nationally in 2016, meaning an overall ratio of one practitioner for every 71 children aged three to five years old and indicating a massive shortfall in the human resources required for universal access.⁷ Again, there were substantial provincial variations, ranging from one practitioner for every 113 children in KwaZulu-Natal to one practitioner for every 41 children in the Free State.

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⁶ In the Norms and Standards for ECD Programmes, issued in the Consolidated Regulations pertaining to the Children’s Act 2005.
A key problem is the lack of entry-level qualifications to the profession. However, it is also a systems issue. The scale of recruitment and training required is unlikely to be delivered in the current ECD ‘market’ framework, particularly while demand remains dormant, but instead requires a co-ordinated system which stimulates and manages the human resource pipeline.

**Venues**

Based on the number of new places that are needed, it can be estimated that over 40 000 new venues for early learning programmes will be required nationally by 2030 to achieve universal access for 3–5½ year-olds. This figure contrasts starkly with the recent government estimate of about 14 000 registered ECD centres currently.8

Social, economic and geographic factors play a large part in determining what types of facilities can be used or built for early learning programmes. Poor children are disproportionately concentrated in both overcrowded urban areas and sparsely populated rural areas. Land shortage and tenure issues in densely populated areas make it difficult to find appropriate sites for purpose-built facilities. This is demonstrated by the fact that the most urbanised province in South Africa, Gauteng, relies most heavily on ECD programmes that are run out of private homes. The 2014 ECD Audit found that 29% of ECD centres were run from formally built houses nationally, but in Gauteng, this figure was 48% (and over 50% if informally built houses were included).

In 2018, nearly three million 0–5 year-olds (42% of the total) lived in non-urban areas.9 The lower population density in these areas often means that building new facilities is less viable. This means that where ECD programmes are provided they are, of necessity, frequently run out of existing premises.

These factors combine to create an essential role for home- and community-based ECD programmes, particularly in poor communities. The 2014 Audit found that over half of existing ECD centres are run from homes, informal structures and community venues. Among unregistered centres (which are likely to be attended primarily by poor children), about two-thirds are run from homes and community premises. This suggests that this kind of provision has emerged as a practical response to local need. However, these programmes face barriers to registration and are treated less favourably in the ECD subsidy system, creating disincentives to system entry even where they are urgently needed.

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8 See https://pmg.org.za/committee-question/12741/?utm_campaign=searchalert&utm_source=transactional&utm_medium=email
9 In 2015, about 2.75 million 0–5 year-olds lived in rural areas according to Ilifa Labantwana’s Early Childhood Review (2017). P.10
2.2 Other factors underlying poor access

Many parents and caregivers cannot afford to send their children to early learning programmes. Even low fees can be prohibitive, particularly for parents who do not work.

Over two million 0–5 year-olds live in households where no adult is employed in either the formal or informal sectors. This means that about one-third of this age group are in families who have no practical need for childcare. These children are some of the most vulnerable, but their parents are highly unlikely to be able to send them to fee-charging programmes. This is a particular factor in rural areas, where children are nearly three times more likely to live in workless households than children in urban areas.

Awareness – stimulating demand

Knowledge and awareness are also pivotal issues. Scientific understanding and societal recognition of the critical role of the early years in children’s development are relatively recent. Public information campaigns have been limited, and many parents remain unaware of the necessity of ensuring that their young children have access to appropriate learning and development opportunities.

Awareness underpins demand in two important ways. Firstly, among the millions of families where no adult is employed, it is essential that parents realise the importance of enrolling their children at early learning programmes, even when they do not need to do so for childcare purposes. Secondly, awareness helps parents to demand the right kinds of early learning programmes and to drive higher quality.

Sustainability

In order to attract and retain new practitioners and social entrepreneurs, the ECD sector must offer sustainable livelihoods. Early learning practitioners in poor communities are less likely to be able to rely on fees to generate an income for themselves. Government data suggests that about one-fifth of parents accessing early learning programmes pay fees of less than R100 per month. For home-based programmes of up to 10 children (the point at which there must be another practitioner), this means a probable maximum income of well below R1 000 per month (once costs such as food and bills have been taken into account) – substantially below the national minimum wage.

The ECD subsidy system is working imperfectly and often fails to reach the programmes that need it most. Government job schemes such as the Community Work Programme (CWP) and Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) provide stipends for some practitioners, but they are set at a low level, meaning that women can often attract a higher income in lower-skilled work. In addition, in some cases, the stipends are time-limited, leaving the practitioner with no income once the contract ends. When programmes in poor communities cannot access the ECD subsidy or an adequate and reliable stipend, it is much harder for them to be sustainable, and many are forced to close.

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2.3 The quality picture

Where early learning programmes do exist, quality is highly variable. This is significant, because research suggests that children generally only benefit from attendance at early learning programmes if a certain level of quality is provided. The issue of quality tends to be linked to poverty. Resource scarcity means that programmes in poor communities are less likely to be registered because they do not meet the health and safety standards and maximum child-adult ratios stipulated by government. Based on government figures from 2018, it is estimated that about 2.5 million 0–5 year-olds are attending unregistered programmes – this represents about three-quarters of the total number of 0–5 year-olds attending some type of ECD programme.¹²

Both registered and unregistered early learning programmes in poor communities are more likely to have inadequate play and learning materials and to be provided by practitioners with little or no training. Government research in 2016 found that about half of early learning programmes did not have any educational toys.¹³ The national audit of ECD centres in 2014 found that even in registered centres, 51% of practitioners had no specific training in ECD, and this rose to 74% of practitioners in unregistered centres.¹⁴

2.4 Factors underlying poor quality

Research tells us that quality in early learning provision depends on a number of factors, many of which are strained or missing in South African programmes. Critical ingredients of quality early learning fall into three categories – programme content, resources and structural features. All of these are underpinned by training.

Figure 3: Critical features of quality ECD programmes

12 This calculation is based on data from the General Household Survey 2018 and official figures on the number of registered ECD centres (Nov 2019). It assumes an average of 60 children per ECD centre, and includes children who are attending Grade R classes in ECD centres.
14 Department of Social Development (2014). National Audit. p.292
There is a lack of entry-level early learning training courses in South Africa. This means that many women who might have the right aptitudes to stimulate and care for young children have difficulty accessing the first rung of the training ladder. When many women themselves have been failed by the education system, it is unrealistic to set the threshold for entry to the profession at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 4, perpetuating a cycle of educational and economic exclusion. This has the unintended effect of many practitioners simply receiving no training at all, with consequential impacts on the quality of programmes.

Some ECD NGOs have helped practitioners to access simple curricula and resources that they can use in their programmes. However, these are not universally available, and many early learning programmes still do not have even a basic daily routine in place. Programmes also often lack the types of simple play and learning materials that contribute to meaningful and varied early learning activities.

Child monitoring or tracking is known to be a key ingredient of effective early learning programmes, but there are few user-friendly tools available to practitioners. Similarly, simple operational policies and tools can help practitioners to run more effective programmes but are not widely available.

Sustaining quality in early learning programmes depends on two things – ongoing coaching and support, and effective quality assurance processes.

However, in South Africa, where practitioners do receive training or resources, these are seldom accompanied by coaching and support mechanisms. There is also as yet no national quality assurance system in place to incentivise and reward quality.

The unintentional effect of the current regulatory regime is that many early learning programmes operate ‘beneath the radar’, excluded from registration but tolerated in the system because of the chronic shortage of places. These programmes are trapped in a cycle of poor quality and no funding, unable to access the very subsidy that would help them to make progress towards regulatory compliance, to afford in-work training and to provide a better environment for children.
3. The structural challenges

2.1 The market framework

In South Africa, the provision of early childhood education (before school) is a market-led sector, dominated by private providers. Parents choose whether and what types of early learning programmes they wish to access, and, theoretically, providers respond to demand. However, the ‘market’ is imperfect. While children are the ‘customers’, parents perform the role of ‘proxy customers’ – in other words, they are relied on to make the right choices for their children. To fulfil this role optimally, parents require four types of social and economic capital:

1. awareness and understanding (of the importance of early learning);
2. appropriate options (so that they can select a programme that meets the needs of their child);
3. accurate information (about the quality of the programmes that they can choose between); and
4. equal purchasing power (to be able to afford their preferred option).

In reality, these conditions are rarely in place, particularly for parents in poor communities. In the absence of a national quality assurance system, the only information on quality for parents is binary – a programme is either registered or not registered. Many families, particularly in rural areas, have extremely limited choices or no choice at all. In addition, the ECD subsidy system fails to reach the early learning programmes that many poor children attend, meaning that these children, far from having equal purchasing power, have none.

2.2 The role of government

ECD is also considered a public good in South Africa, and therefore within the market framework, government performs a regulatory role to ensure quality and facilitate access. While there are a handful of state-run ECD centres in South Africa, government does not generally recruit practitioners or set up early learning programmes. This fundamentally limits their capacity to both plan for and ensure access. It also means that, unlike in the schooling system, the architecture and systems for delivery at scale have not been built.

Similarly, because early learning programmes are almost all privately provided, the type of government system needed to oversee the sector effectively is fundamentally different from that needed for the schooling sector. The government has not to date created the type of centralised planning, co-ordination and quality assurance mechanism (such as an ECD agency) that will be necessary to ensure and manage progress towards equitable access to early learning.

The regulatory framework

The government currently fulfils its regulatory role in two main ways: registering early learning programmes to ensure minimum standards are met, and subsidising programmes that serve poor children. However, the entry-level standards for conditional registration are set at a level that is unobtainable for many programmes. This creates a circular problem – the programmes cannot improve their infrastructure and provision without funding, but the government will not provide the ECD subsidy until the programme is registered.
3.3 The role of NGOs

In many areas, NGOs and community-based organisations have stepped in to try to ensure poorer children have more equitable access to quality programmes. These organisations perform many important roles as training providers, curriculum and resource providers, and direct programme providers. Increasingly, they also support early learning programmes to build capacity for management and to work towards compliance for registration.

However, these interventions are generally characterised by their local (or sometimes regional) lens. They are usually not joined up, and they are not based on population-level planning. While they can shift outcomes for the children they reach, that reach is generally limited. In addition, where NGOs directly provide early learning programmes using an employment model, the very nature of the model means it is less amenable to scale.

Figure 4 below provides a simplified view of the fragmented nature of the current early learning landscape. It shows the full early learning programme delivery spectrum on the horizontal access, starting with awareness raising on the left and moving through recruitment and training, programme set-up, curriculum, registration and quality assurance. The vertical axis shows scale (in terms of the number of children reached) and therefore the potential for population-level change. A non-exhaustive selection of different types of ECD and early learning organisations is then plotted on the graph.

Figure 4: A simplified view of the early learning delivery landscape in South Africa

The early learning delivery landscape is intrinsically fragmented, undermining government’s ability to plan for equitable coverage.
The diagram shows how some organisations are achieving a higher reach but are only providing some of the functions on the delivery continuum. On the other hand, other organisations are offering a range of services and support but are reaching relatively limited numbers of children.

The net effect of this is that, despite efforts at co-ordination nationally and locally, the delivery landscape is intrinsically fragmented. This undermines government’s ability to plan for equitable coverage at population-level. For example, while government can direct funding towards a community organisation supporting dozens of local early learning programmes to improve compliance and sustainability, they would need to set up funding agreements with thousands of such organisations in order to achieve coverage. Or while government can fund an organisation working across a number of provinces to improve curriculum quality and learning materials in existing programmes, this will not address the urgent issue of increasing system capacity in those provinces by supporting new programmes to be set up.

3.4 The economics

The economics of existing approaches to early learning provision do not work at population-level. It will cost billions of rands to close the early learning provisioning gap – even without building new facilities. Programmes with high or even medium unit costs might be viable at a small scale, but would quickly become unaffordable if rolled out nationally, even if the overall funding envelope substantially increased. (Unit costs mean the per child costs of a programme once all the associated costs are taken into account, such as training, management, administration, materials, coaching and support.)

In South Africa, government spending is highly constrained for the foreseeable future. The government projects that spending on the ECD Conditional Grant will only increase by 5.5% next year, and 6.8% the following year. It will be essential for significant funding to be reallocated from elsewhere if the government is to achieve universal access. In the meantime, maintaining unit costs at an affordable level will be an essential component of any strategy for scale.
4. The untapped potential

4.1 Human capital

There is a massive pool of untapped human capital in South Africa, particularly among women. Many unemployed and under-employed women may lack formal qualifications but possess the aptitudes to be effective early learning practitioners, including a strong caring instinct.

There is evidence that just short basic training coupled with coaching and quality assurance processes can equip practitioners with the basic skills needed to shift developmental outcomes for children. In other words, long lead-in times are not required, and with the right systems and processes, in just a matter of months practitioners can move through the stages of recruitment, selection and training, to programme set-up. In-work support can then ensure continuing professional development, and initial training can articulate to formal qualifications.

Figure 5 shows how human resource development is linked to the questions of sustainable livelihoods and the social economy.

Figure 5: Linking the early learning human resource pipeline and the social economy

4.2 The social economy

Early learning programmes create direct employment and contribute to the government’s goals of supporting micro-enterprises and creating more opportunities for training and skills development.

Crucially, they contribute to economic activity **within** the poorest communities. Home- and community-based programmes are an example of micro-enterprises that are easy to set up (as low initial investment is required) and that carry a relatively low risk (as demand is predictable).

Early learning programmes stimulate the social economy in a further sense by creating childcare places for women who want to go out and work. Without easy access to affordable childcare, women from poor homes are more likely to be forced to stay at home. This undercuts gender equality and is bad for society as a whole, constraining a significant part of the workforce and reducing economic output overall.

4.3 Maximising existing venues – supporting home- and community-based programmes

Over time, it will be important to build more purpose-built ECD centres. However, the evidence suggests that positive child outcomes depend on the presence of quality rather than on the particular setting. In other words, quality early learning programmes do not require purpose-built ECD centres but can be provided in home- and community-based settings as well.

Relying on new purpose-built facilities creates two fundamental problems: Firstly, it diverts limited funding to expensive infrastructure. In a highly constrained funding environment, for every rand spent on a new facility, there is a consequential reduction in either access or quality for other children. Secondly, it drastically slows the pace of roll-out, with new access depending on the progress of thousands of new-build projects through the planning and construction phases.

In the short to medium terms at least, it therefore makes better economic and practical sense to support the expansion and improvement of early learning programmes using existing premises, including homes, by investing in better infrastructure, resources and training for these types of setting.

4.4 Social networks and community capital

Many poor communities in South Africa are bound together by strong social networks, informal and formal leadership structures, participatory processes, and a range of community assets, including indigenous knowledges, shared values and local resources. Unlike more atomised communities, these types of community are capable of rapid mobilisation to achieve common goals, as they are rich in the forms of community capital that are necessary for successful, locally owned social interventions.

It becomes evident that without a new systems solution, we will be tinkering at the edges of an unscalable and fragmented model of early learning provision that has failed to deliver equity for millions of children. This will not only mean poor return on investment for government, but also, more seriously, that hundreds of thousands of poor children will continue to miss out on the early learning opportunities that provide the foundations for educational success.

Instead, we need a system where:

- **Access** is enabled through increased system capacity, sufficient human resources, adequate venues, and affordability;
- **Quality** is enabled through training, evidence-based curricula, play and learning materials, operational tools, coaching and support mechanisms, effective child monitoring, and robust monitoring and evaluation, including a quality assurance system; and
- **Both access and quality** are enabled through awareness raising that stimulates demand, and the development of trusted brands that signpost quality.

The diagram below is a revised version of Figure 4 above, and helps to illustrate how a national early learning delivery platform can join up and amplify the work of existing NGOs while bringing critical new players (such as recruitment organisations) into the sector.

**Figure 6: The role of a national early learning delivery platform**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale (no. children reached)</th>
<th>Recruitment &amp; set-up</th>
<th>Training &amp; resourcing</th>
<th>Compliance</th>
<th>Prof dev &amp; QA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small (local)</td>
<td>Awareness-raising</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Compliance</td>
<td>Coaching, prof dev &amp; business devt, Child monitoring &amp; quality assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recruitment &amp; selection</td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Venues &amp; initial safety checks</td>
<td>Materials &amp; equipment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Operations</td>
<td>Compliance &amp; registration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prof dev &amp; QA</td>
<td>CHILD MONITORING &amp; QUALITY ASSURANCE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Yes**
- A national delivery platform e.g. SmartStart
- A sub-regional registration org
- A provincial ECD incubator
- A community-based organisation supporting ECD

**No**
- A local ECD training org
- A regional NGO running playgroups
- A public info campaign
- A specialist recruitment org
- An ECD curriculum & materials provider

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population-level change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An early learning delivery platform addresses and integrates every stage on the delivery continuum. In areas where NGOs are active it acts as an equal partner, harnessing and linking up their efforts and providing the systems for growth. In areas where NGOs currently have no coverage, it seeds new NGOs or provides the full service spectrum directly itself. This means that the platform can plan for and ensure equitable coverage because the provision of new places is not vulnerable to the significant variations in the presence of key other service providers in any particular area.

A national early learning delivery platform is not simply a bigger NGO or service. It is a new approach which is designed at the outset for scale and provides the operational architecture and systems that enable it to keep expanding until all children are reached.

The central task of a national platform is therefore to define the necessary and sufficient elements of a minimum critical specification that is lean enough to reach the maximum number of children and robust enough to secure early learning gains. This specification relates both to the programme design (e.g. training and curriculum) and to the overall platform features that are likely to underpin success.

In particular, in the South African context, a successful national early learning delivery platform will need to:
- establish a practitioner recruitment system with accessible entry points;
- provide a managed and safe process for onboarding new venues using existing premises, including homes;
- provide a locally appropriate curriculum that can realistically be implemented in a wide range of settings;
- not ‘train and leave’ but hold practitioners in a system of support and development;
- have robust quality assurance systems across the network;
- hold unit costs low; and
- align to and support regulatory compliance.

**Figure 7: A national early learning delivery platform: Imperatives, constraints and opportunities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPERATIVES</th>
<th>CONSTRAINTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service-spectrum integration</td>
<td>Social context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scalability</td>
<td>Cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceleration</td>
<td>Regulatory framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MINIMUM CRITICAL SPECIFICATION FOR A NATIONAL EARLY LEARNING DELIVERY PLATFORM**

- Existing venues
- Human capital
- Social economy

**ENABLERS AND OPPORTUNITIES**
The benefits of one or more national early learning delivery platforms

**Funding**
Because a national early learning delivery platform plays a fundamentally different role in the ECD system to existing organisations, it attracts new and additional funding into the sector. Increasingly, the largest multilateral and institutional funders are seeking to invest in systems interventions that are likely to propel durable, population-level change. By attracting these types of funder, a national delivery platform increases the overall ECD funding envelope.

**Partnership with government**
There is a natural symbiosis between government’s role as the ECD duty-bearer and one or more early learning delivery platforms. Commissioning-type arrangements would enable one or more platforms to enter into a carefully defined relationship with government. At the same time, the overall number of government contracting relationships would be reduced and population-level planning for each stage on the delivery continuum would be made possible.

**Partnership with ECD NGOs**
A national delivery platform can build empowering relationships between equal partners with distinct roles. Partnership agreements with existing ECD NGOs and other organisations can harness, amplify and channel funding towards the best of what already exists. The end result is a platform and network that are much more than the sum of their parts.

**Accelerated recruitment and training**
A national early learning delivery platform can create a new and reliable human resource pipeline, by incorporating recruitment and selection systems which identify and train a high volume of new practitioners.

**Accelerated programme set-up**
In the short to medium terms in South Africa, new early learning providers will need to be supported to maximise the potential of existing premises. A national delivery platform can provide processes for essential initial health and safety checks for home- and community-based programmes, bringing these types of facility on stream in a safe and managed way.

**Quality early learning**
A national delivery platform can ensure that the known components of quality programmes are in place, by defining an evidence-based daily programme, prescribing key programme parameters (such as dosage and group size), and providing standardised operational tools and resources. The platform’s quality assurance system can then ensure that standards are maintained across the network.

**Regulatory compliance**
By addressing health and safety and programme content together, a national delivery platform can assist early learning programmes towards compliance with statutory requirements. In conjunction with government
adopting enabling and inclusive approaches to programme registration, this could contribute to an exponential rise in the number of programmes that are included in the regulatory and funding nets.

**Affordability**
A national delivery platform can ensure that early learning programmes are affordable at the point of access (to the household purse) by helping them to obtain subsidies and stipends, and that they are affordable at the point of funding (to the public purse) through significant efficiencies of scale and a relentless focus on keeping unit costs low.

**Sustainability**
A national delivery platform can provide an efficient system for routing the ECD subsidy to thousands of programmes and can also work in tandem with job-creation schemes, helping to ensure the sustainability of programmes in communities that need them most.

**Efficiency**
A national delivery platform therefore generates multiple efficiencies for government by:

- reducing unit costs;
- reducing the burden on provincial government to support regulatory compliance; and
- reducing the number of separate agreements that provincial government must enter into in order to disburse the ECD subsidy.

**Awareness and activation**
A national early learning delivery platform can play a critical role in activating both the demand and supply sides. By building a strong and trusted brand, raising awareness and sharing knowledge, a platform can both attract new practitioners into the network and propel demand for more programmes at community level.
6. SmartStart

SmartStart is South Africa’s first full-service early learning delivery platform. In just five years since set-up, it has reached over 75,000 children. A recent independent evaluation of the progress of 199 children attending 69 SmartStart programmes confirmed that it was achieving positive outcomes for children across developmental domains. Using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) tool,\(^{17}\) the researchers found that the proportion of children achieving the expected standard for their age nearly doubled over eight months – increasing from 32% of children at baseline to 62% of children at endline.\(^{18}\)

SmartStart’s social franchise model places collaboration at the heart of our approach. We work with implementing partners who license and support early learning practitioners to deliver the same evidence-based programme for three- to five-year-olds. This organisational architecture makes possible the creation and management of tens of thousands of new early learning programmes, while the operational centre remains relatively small. This means that many more children can be reached in a shorter space of time than through conventional ECD programme delivery methods.

Fidelity and quality at programme level are supported by training, operational tools, play and learning materials, coach-led quality assurance processes, and a network of ‘Clubs’. Our Franchisees (known as SmartStarters) operate as independent micro-enterprises or community-based services, generating an income through government subsidies and stipends and through parent fees. SmartStart provides financial literacy and small business training to support Franchisees on their growth pathways.

Community activation systems help to stimulate both the supply and demand sides. SmartStart uses aptitude testing to identify suitable candidates before taking them through careful training and licensing processes which include various assessments. Initial training is short, and knowledge and skills are built through Club meetings and further training opportunities.

The SmartStart approach is agnostic as to setting and uncompromising on quality. It therefore values and supports homes and community premises as potential venues for ECD programmes, and focuses funding on training, materials and coaching rather than on buildings. A basic health and safety check is used to ensure that all programme venues provide a suitable environment for young children.

To facilitate regulatory compliance, SmartStart has developed a registration toolkit to assist SmartStart programmes with the statutory registration process and has provide guidelines for Franchisors. At policy level, SmartStart has used its implementation experience to work with government to explore more inclusive pathways to registration and funding.

SmartStart’s unit costs are very low, assisted by economies of scale and streamlined operational systems. Partnerships with the CWP, the EPWP and the Jobs Fund are in place, and SmartStart is well placed to act as an intermediary organisation to enable the government ECD subsidy to reach thousands more poor children. At the same time, SmartStart has leveraged new funding from major institutional funders, bringing millions of rands of new investment into South Africa’s ECD sector.

\(^{17}\) The ELOM tool is a population-level instrument designed to measure the developmental status of 4–5 year-olds in five domains. It has been normed for South African children based on a representative sample of 1,331 children. Based on children’s average scores, a group is allocated to one of three age-standardised performance bands (‘At risk’, ‘Falling behind’ or ‘Achieving the ELOM standard’).

The SmartStart brand is increasingly visible and well-known. Alongside public information campaigns, the brand is helping to build a national movement of practitioners and parents who are passionate about children and passionate about early learning.

Figure 8 summarises the ten features of a national early learning delivery platform which will enable it to solve for for the quality, scale and sustainability imperatives in the South African context. Each of these is an integral part of SmartStart’s architecture and approach.

**Figure 8: The role of a national early learning delivery platform**

| Systems for scale                      | • Standardised processes and operational tools  
|                                       | • Licensing-type arrangements (not employment)  
|                                       | • Data and information management systems  
| Strong partnerships                   | • With government and investors  
|                                       | • With ECD NGOs and other delivery organisations  
|                                       | • With communities and parents and caregivers  
| Human resource pipeline               | • Accessible recruitment entry points  
|                                       | • Basic training *and* continuing professional development  
|                                       | • Support networks (clubs)  
| High-quality early learning           | • Prescribed curriculum, dosage and ratios  
|                                       | • Learning and play materials  
|                                       | • Coaching  
| Sustainable livelihoods              | • Micro-enterprise development support  
|                                       | • Capacity to act as ‘intermediary’ for ECD subsidy payments  
|                                       | • Access to jobs programme stipends  
| Mixed ECD modalities                 | • Optimal use of home- and community-based venues  
|                                       | • Flexible programme design and content for diverse settings  
| Monitoring and quality assurance      | • Child monitoring  
|                                       | • Programme quality assurance  
|                                       | • Outputs and outcomes monitoring and evaluation  
| Low cost                              | • Low unit costs for government and investors  
|                                       | • Affordability at household level  
| Regulatory alignment                 | • Support for compliance with statutory requirements  
|                                       | • Tools for registration  
|                                       | • Tools for subsidy applications  
| Brand awareness (behaviour change)   | • Public information campaigns to stimulate demand  
|                                       | • Visible and trusted brand  
|                                       | • Support for parents to strengthen home learning environments  

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SmartStart has shown what is possible, and as government incentives align with provider interests, there could be an emergence of a number of early learning delivery platforms. Government can accelerate this process by configuring the design of a new early learning commissioning system around these types of platform for scale. This in turn will help to transition the funding of a critical basic service for children from the philanthropic sector to the state.

In other words, placing national early learning delivery platforms at the heart of a national strategy for scale aligns the interests and capabilities of government, funders, NGOs and early learning providers in such a way as to make possible the government’s pledge of universal access to ECD for every child. And when the starting point of the entire Grade R cohort moves forward, benefits will be felt at systems level in schools, meaning that sustained population-level change in educational and wider outcomes will finally be realised.

By aligning the interests and capabilities of government, funders, NGOs and ECD providers we can achieve universal access for children.