

National Early Childhood Development Community of Practice

MEETING HIGHLIGHTS 20 May 2020

Virtual Meeting

BACKGROUND

The first National BRIDGE ECD CoP meeting to discuss the reopening of ECD programmes took place on the 6th May 2020; this CoP was a follow-up meeting from that. The meeting on the 6th May 2020 ended off with a resolution to build recommendations based on the themes that had been identified as key areas in the reopening of ECD programmes by BRIDGE ECD CoP members in KZN and WC. The themes include:

1. Protocols for ECD sites to keep children, staff and communities safe.
2. Basic Services that are needed for ECD programmes to be ready for reopening.
3. Financial support for ECD programmes to be able to be able to open up.
4. Guidelines for ECD practitioners to engage meaningfully with children on Covid-19 and the required health and safety protocols.
5. Collaboration and with whom? (this theme was later integrated into the first four themes)

A working group was identified that would assist with the process of building recommendations and that process has resulted in a document titled: *Reopening of ECD programmes-principles and recommendations*. This document is useful for further conversation on the reopening of ECD programmes. It will be shared with the sector and key stakeholders such as the government.

Objective for this meeting

The objective of the meeting was to better understand what to expect under the Covid-19 circumstances so we can plan appropriately for the future and identify opportunities for ECD. Sheila Drew (SAIDE) facilitated the meeting and expressed that the pandemic has highlighted inequalities in South Africa, saying that there is a lack of access to basic resources and this is an opportunity to emphasise the need for collaboration and beginning to address some inequalities.

Opening scenarios to stimulate thoughts and discussions

Two real life experiences were shared with CoP members to stimulate thinking and discussions. One reality was a video of children attending recently reopened ECD facilities and schools in China. The children had to go through a number of safety and health protocols such as temperature screening, spraying of shoes, clothes and bags, discarding of masks and practicing social distancing throughout the day etc. The second reality was shared by Abram Kgari (chairperson of the Diepsloot ECD Forum) where he took members of the CoP through daily life of children and the community of Diepsloot under COVID-19 lockdown.

“This is a complex problem and there is research suggesting that children are not as susceptible to the virus but this is not assured so they need to be protected as best as possible. What is the best way forward for the well-being of children?” - [Sheila Drew]

Participants reflected on the video and these were some of their responses:

- These types of measures cost a lot of money and are unrealistic in our context.
- Our pre-schools cannot be made into hospital-type environments. We have to get away from institutional type of practices.
- South Africa is similar to a few South American countries where children are taught to be collaborative and to build relationships.
- We cannot import individualistic practices from other countries and try make them fit into our context.
- We cannot ignore that our environment is risky and we need to think of the most suitable way to mitigate the risks in our context. What’s key is the child's well-being which needs to be kept in mind at all times. The well-being of the entire staff needs to also be taken into account here.
- We need to look at sustainable measures as this is not only for now but for a long time.

Life in Diepsloot under COVID-19

Abram Kgari is the chairperson of the Diepsloot ECD forum and founder of Oratile ECD centre. Abram gave the CoP members an idea of the impact that COVID-19 and the lockdown has on the Diepsloot community and ECD.

Generally it has been difficult to enforce lockdown regulations in townships because of the socio-economic challenges:

- The main need for people at the moment is food and they que in lines all day in order to get food.
- Overcrowding in homes due to the large and mobile populations in townships like Diepsloot results in children playing together unsupervised and without any safety and health measures.
- Government has not provided any assistance to ECD since COVID-19 lockdown.

- There is a level of assistance with nutrition from funders however this is directed at centres that the funders are already supporting.

Abram articulated that the best solution for children was for the ECD centres to open so they can supervise the children and ensure that they observe healthy precautions. Caregivers are going back to work and require childcare facilities to look after their children during the day. Children can also receive nutritious meals. He stressed that ECDs need to open with rules and restrictions as most centres are over-crowded. Social distancing needs to be in place. The number of children per centre needs to be decreased and appropriate hygiene measures (soap and water) need to be put in place. Children won't share equipment. Parents need to wear masks when dropping off and fetching children. At centres children will also be educated on the virus whereas on the street that don't know what it is and how its spread etc. Children also need to get their regular meals at school.

Sheila thanked Abram for his story and acknowledged that it was useful for us to hear how the lockdown was impacting people with different backgrounds and living in different contexts.

Participant comments

- We might be putting the cart before the horse in terms of reopening ECD programmes. Perhaps the ECD community should be focused on funding for the resources that ECDs will need in order to be compliant. Mapping out the unregistered ECD centres that will definitely not have budget for resources would be a practical intervention. There is room for a unified proposal for ECD centres that can be taken to funders to articulate their needs however this would require a list of requirements that must be in place in order to comply from government.
- The reopening of ECD programmes is complex- there is research that says that the younger children are less vulnerable to Covid-19 but part of the problem is that we do not know for sure. We have to take into consideration the complexities when going forward.
- Children may also be subjected to more violence being at home all the time and this needs to be kept in mind. This has also been mentioned by Angie Motshekga as a critical issue that the DBE has flagged.



GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Virtual break-away groups thought about and discussed children in different geographies and different settings under the following themes:

What changes do you think are required to promote the development of children within the Covid-19 context?

a) Early learning (programmes, ratios, numbers of children in a site, conducting indoor and outdoor activities etc.)

- If there is a number limit on the number of children allowed per ECD programme, where will the excess children go and how will the ECD operation generate income? Every child must have access; it cannot be for the privileged few.
- Children could be placed in a pod system where fewer children (not more than 6) are catered for in homes by Day Mothers to decrease over-crowding in many ECD centres particularly in disadvantaged and densely populated communities. Home based care in pods can facilitate mother tongue education. The challenge with creating smaller pods would be the salaries of the Day Mothers as an example that would have to be subsidised. A 'Basic Income Grant' was proposed that would provide a salary for the Day Mother and nutrition for the children.
- There is also the use of other community spaces that can be considered to increase access in the context of Covid- 19. Parents take their children to the nearest ECD centre and sometimes their siblings are in a school nearby so moving children around is not always viable.
- The Department of Social Development have their norms and standards on staff child ratios according to age groups, that has to be re-thought through dialogue – the number of children in any facility is usually influenced by income.
- Masks for children under two are likely to be hazardous, their immune systems are still developing and their language has not developed to a point where they can understand and implement instructions. It was recommended that children under two should not return to their ECD programmes for some time until there is calm.
- Children with disabilities and barriers to learning should not be excluded.
- Be aware that children are social, they would understand the concept of 'physical distancing' much better than 'social distancing'.

b) Health and nutrition services for children

The need for nutrition was emphasised repeatedly for the following reasons:

- There are a high number of stunted children in South Africa. Stunting can be beaten and there are examples such as Peru. Covid-19 has worsened the situation for those who do live in poverty and so ECD programmes offering nutrition become even more important.
- Support with nutrition is required for registered and **unregistered sites**.
- Food for the children could be provided through food vouchers on Day Mothers' cell phones for their six children to access food for their small group of children.
- **Caregiver responsiveness (engaging with and helping families and helping communities support young children)**
- Both children and parents need to be educated properly on Covid- 19 in order for them to understand and implement the new measures.
- We need to think of how to enable and empower the parents bearing in mind that many are illiterate and don't have access to data.
- Psychosocial support for adults and for the children needs to be made available.

c) Social services

- Every ECD site needs to get Covid-19 support, whether registered or not. Conditional registration is needed for all.
- Guidelines are needed from DSD and DoH to know what their expectations are.
- There is no one size fits all, protocols can be put together but it will need to be adapted for each site due to different circumstances.
- There has been division created between registered and unregistered ECD sites. We need to shift our focus to what are 'best practice' ECD sites regardless of their status.
- The department needs to re-look at the conditional and maintenance grant in order to help more during this time.
- There needs to be a dedicated social worker appointed in each district (this used to happen but is no longer the case.)
- When looking at financing, we also need to consider grants that parents are receiving for their children and make sure that SASSA is also on board. During the lockdown SASSA was not taking any new applications for Care Dependency Grants. This could have a major impact on children's well-being.

What other ideas do you have about ECD that can be opportunities for the future?

- The possibility that there will be children in need of early learning and child care facilities due to restrictions imposed on ECD sites means that there is an opportunity to rethink the provision of ECD as it relates to communities.

"The Lockdown has taught us all that ECD cannot depend on the uncertainty of whether parents pay fees or not. We have 30% unemployment in SA and ECD forms a vital part of the informal economy. [Nora]

- Children have a range of services that they require to develop holistically. Their needs are not confined to the ECD facility - be it a centre or non-centre based facility. We can think differently about how we use spaces and people in communities to ensure the wellbeing of children.
- Children need to be made centre of a new 'ecosystem' in communities. This ecosystem must think about using different spaces for children and providing essential needs through a community-driven approach such as community food gardens serving nutritional needs of the community and children in the ECD facilities. The community can also provide a whole range of services which contribute to the whole ECD package. Cognisance to children and their ability to deal with change must be taken into consideration.
- ECDs can partner with a faith based organisation - the site then becomes part of the community.
- There is a partnership of this nature in a community in KZN where the ECD centre and the faith based organisation have started a food garden and provide a soup kitchen. This collaboration is an example of how working together works. Young people also volunteer their time at the centre and this keeps them busy.
- We need to stop thinking of poor communities as deficit-how do we collaborate with parents, practitioners etc. in poor communities to think about a range of services and how they can help themselves? We have to start with how communities see their problems and not how we see their problems and what we think is the solution.
- We should not assume that all children need to be outside of their homes to develop optimally. There are children who thrive from receiving care and support at home.
- Collaboration stands out as a key principal in reimagining ECD as a function that is embedded within a community and there is opportunity to further the conversation on collaboration.

WAY FORWARD AND THE FOLLOW UP MEETING

- BRIDGE will consolidate the notes as soon as possible and communicate a date for the next CoP.
- BRIDGE would also like to have a continuation of this discussion having gathered some insights from government if possible.
- ECD CoP members to please forward documents and other resources from different groups to Thandeka so we can all share.
- Collaboration will be a key focus in our next meeting.

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