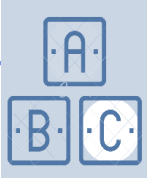




Early Childhood Development Community of Practice

MEETING HIGHLIGHTS 04 August 2020

Virtual Meeting



WELCOME AND PURPOSE

Patsy Pillay (KZN BRIDGE Champion) facilitated the National BRIDGE ECD CoP meeting which was well attended by 94 participants, and also live streamed to Facebook. The aim of the meeting was to understand what the ECD workforce is experiencing on the ground since the official reopening of the ECD sector. A gloomy picture has been emerging through social media communications and other platforms. In an attempt to focus on some positives, the session started with a Mentimeter question which asked participants to ‘**share one good thing happening in ECD in their province or district.**’

Unfortunately, a significant number of the responses showed that people feel there is little positive action around ECD provisioning in their provinces and districts, as this sample of responses illustrates.



A few of the positive statements that were shared include:

- The role of parents as the ‘first teachers’ has been magnified.
- The fact that the sector has reopened was considered positive.
- Verifications are being conducted by the Department of Social Development (DSD).
- ECD sites are providing nutrition support through soup kitchens etc. to children and communities.



PRESENTATION: KEY ENGAGEMENTS AROUND ECD: WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE SECTOR?

Overview of the sector's engagements

In order to provide context to the day's discussion, Thandeka Rantsi from BRIDGE gave an overview of activities in the sector in recent months. Thandeka noted BRIDGE's engagements and spoke to some of the interventions and interactions that have occupied the sector in general.

- BRIDGE hosted a series of national and provincial CoPs in order to consolidate members' thinking and considerations around reopening under the C19 pandemic. The feedback from these CoPs was consolidated into a BRIDGE ECD CoP position paper, which was shared with the sector and key stakeholders such as the Department of Social Development (DSD) and Department of Basic Education (DBE).
- BRIDGE also participated in an advocacy report and campaign led by Ilifa Labantwana along with SmartStart, Nelson Mandela Foundation, NECDA and SA ECD Congress. The report looked into the plight of the ECD workforce under COVID-19 circumstances.
- In June, the DSD initiated a workstream process to develop a framework for reopening. This was an effort between government and civil society organisations, and BRIDGE and many other CoP member organisations took part in this.
- The BRIDGE ECD Reference Group decided to formally engage the DSD on reviving the Intersectoral Forum (ISF) to achieve coordination in the sector and more formal ways of collaboration between government and civil society.
- BRIDGE, through the steering committee of the ISF and the Collaboration of ECD Networks (CECDN) has been addressing the issue of supporting the ECD sector with DSD.

Where are we now as a sector?

We have seen a lot of activity from the sector to get the ECD programmes reopened, and to garner support for the workforce during the lockdown. Advocacy efforts in this regard have taken many forms, including litigation against DSD by a number of civil society organisations. Now that the sector has reopened, there are processes and procedures in place to ensure safety and COVID-19 compliance in our ECD programmes. The DSD *Standard Operating Procedures and Guidelines* and self-assessments are an example of these. The sector is now navigating the 'new normal' as teaching and learning will surely not be the same.

Participant Input

After the presentation, CoP members were asked to consider the question 'what now?'. Two key questions came up from participants, and various comments as captured below.

1. What is happening to parent or home programmes, i.e. how are we reaching the caregivers?
2. Do we have a sense of how many ECDs are opening, given the financial constraints of many?

Advocacy for government support of the ECD sector

The need for advocacy came out quite strongly from the participants. People expressed how important it was for the sector to advocate for the necessary support (financial, recognition of ECD workforce and contribution to children's development and economy) from government.

Need to advocate for funding

- "The sector is in crisis, some ECD sites have opened but few children are going due to fear or not being able to pay fees, but without fees those centres will disappear. Even registered centres cant' afford to continue. We need to appeal (as a sector) to government (treasury and presidency) to provide the required resources because our advocacy is not strong enough." Pam Picken

Need to advocate for contribution of ECD to development

- "We are hearing about innovation and networking etc. – everyone is really trying but parents are resisting due to financial pressures. We do need to see how Covid-19 can be an opportunity going forward and we should not reduce the problem just to care and nutrition. We need to use the opportunity to emphasize economic development, labour etc. and advocate that ECD is key to development and people need to recognise this. We need to mainstream ECD, after all the South African economy cannot function without effective care for children so that parents can work." Theresa

Need to advocate for ECD to be a priority

- "The ECD sector is left to its own devices and there is more that we need to do to hold government accountable. ECD has not had enough collective strength to be prioritised." Kaathima.
- Margaret also agreed that more advocacy for funding needs to take place not just for ECD sites but civil society organisations as well.

Caregiver support

In response to the question of how parents have been supported throughout the lockdown, a few organisations that work with caregivers gave CoP members an idea of what they have been doing in this regard. The ECD CoP in collaboration with the Early Grade Reading (EGR) CoP also held a CoP on 'Caregiver Support' in May 2020. To access the meeting highlights of this CoP, please click [here](#).

- **Project literacy** has opted to conduct their home based programme from a community development centre where 5 families can be part of a session at a time whilst practicing social distancing.
- An organisation that supports home based programmes for day mothers using the **SmartStart** model have advised their practitioners to stay closed, and provide support through a number of resources (learning activities, summarised SOPs etc). A link to the SmartStart resources can be found at <https://www.smartstart.org.za/covid-19-resources-and-guides/>.

RTO and DSD partnerships in verifications and reopening workshops

Ntataise Lowveld in Mpumalanga reported that the provincial DSD was working well with three RTOs, namely, **Ntataise**, **Penreach** and **Cotlands**, to provide support to ECD centre managers. The organisations have been assisting DSD with the distribution of self-assessments and the verifications of the ECD sites.

ECD Basic Income Grant vs Compliance Monitors

- There were some comments in support of the Basic Income Grant that could be disbursed to women taking care of groups of children, regardless of the number of children. We should move away from using ECD as a profit-making tool, because ECD helps with community well-being.

- Government's plan to allocate R1.3 billion through the stimulus package to use youth as compliance officers was not supported. Who are these youth? What experience do they have in ECD? Why should that group be trained when there are practitioners needing work?
- There is a huge problem with how government views ECD. It is viewed as 'women's work' which is always undervalued!



GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Now that ECD programmes have opened, what are we learning about:

1. DSD processes (e.g. self-assessments, verifications of ECD sites, support from provincial DSD officials such as social workers, provision of PPE)

- There is a lot of confusion regarding DSD processes. ECD practitioners are not sure what they should be doing in preparation for the reopening because there is a lack of communication from DSD, and practitioners don't know where to get hold of the necessary forms (self-assessments and Standard Operating Procedures [SOPs]).
- There are many queries about application packs for assistance in registration, but no one knows what they are and what they consist of.
- The support toolkit that has been made available to ECD operators costs R4500. This covers masks and visors; however, the SOPs do not talk about masks. This is an example of unclear communication.
- There is a lack of consistency between the provinces. For example, the Western Cape (WC) is giving funding for unregistered sites, but in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN) there is no support for unregistered centres. The DSD must communicate the same requirements across the country.
- Some ECD managers don't even know about SOPs. In the Midlands they have to go and find their own resources.
- DSD compliance requirements are being enforced very stringently and to the point where there is almost harassment going on.
- There is a lack of capacity to manage sites and understand and implement protocols effectively. Even middle class sites are collapsing, which raises concerns about the disadvantaged ECD sites.
- Some people feel intimidated by the verification and monitoring process.

2. Support from other organisations and ECD facilities (including RTOs, child welfare organisations etc.)

- There is a need for engagement and collaboration between ECDs, RTOs and other organisations.
- Donors are reallocating funding during this time in order to provide mobile data.

3. Staff management of the C19 requirements

- ECD facilitators are being given confusing and mixed messages. For example, how does an isolation room work in ECD centres with limited space? There should be other ways of managing illness.
- Ntataise has shared their own training manual and support materials on the reopening of ECD centres, psychosocial support and capacity building for ECD workers. They have shared this with

centres and have engaged with DSD saying that they are ready to capacitate practitioners, but have had no response.

4. Parental engagement

- Parenting programmes have been widely offered, but these need to be monitored and evaluated in order to assess their effectiveness, particularly in poor communities where there are a range of contextual challenges.
- WhatsApp is being widely used to communicate with parents – for example, daily free parental downloads in the Western Cape are offered in all official languages by Wordworks.
- DO More foundation has a website that has a plethora of resources from SmartStart, Workworks and others which they are trying to get zero-rated.
- Some parents are scared to send their children back, and some ECD sites do not want to open yet. This causes a problem for practitioners.
- Surveys to see how families coping could be shared through the BRIDGE platform.

5. Psychosocial issues (children and staff)

- Lack of human contact is leading to psychosocial issues. People need to be supported to stay in touch with each other to keep up morale.
- In support of social distancing, children now have to be told that '**not** sharing is caring' – this is this the new normal and what will the impact be? How can practitioners be more sensitive when communicating these new and confusing guidelines to children?

6. Financial performance since the reopening

- There is a financial cost to re-opening and many sites cannot even afford to do this.
- Only 10-20% of children are returning to ECD sites. ECD operators spend a lot of money to ensure that the centre is safe to open, and when they cannot make this money back they face shutting down.
- The cost of constant cleaning and sanitising puts a strain on the finances of ECD sites.
- Some centres cannot open due to lack of funding and even due to vandalism.

7. Sustainability

- Only active involvement from the DSD will enable sites to carry on, and the sector to grow.
- The number of children going to ECD sites has dropped, which also impacts on sustainability of the sector. At the same time, ECD sites closing down is problematic as we already do not have enough sites for the number of children under five years old.
- There is huge gap between what happens on the ground and what is envisioned by law and policy.
- There is short term assistance for ECD sites that are financially constrained with PPE and donations, but this assistance will not continue for much longer.

LAST COMMENTS AND RESOLUTIONS

“Covid-19 has really highlighted disparities and inequities in general. ECD is vital to the country and civil society in order to protect the rights of children. We should approach the government saying that we want to work with them and we are willing to share, specifically on a special Covid-19 Relief Grant for the ECD sector (just as the taxi sector received) and a General Income Grant for practitioners and/or for ECD sites to get back on their feet.” Patsy Pillay

CoP members felt strongly that we need a powerful voice to address government and hold them accountable. Some points made include:

- NECDA, SA Congress and BRIDGE need to make a case to the DSD to properly engage with the ECD sector regarding verification support and monitoring on compliance. NGOs that are supporting DSD need to be properly paid, not just for the operational costs, but also for planning and implementing new ways for the future of this sector to benefit children, the workforce and the country.
- Outside of this CoP, not much collaboration has been seen. Not many funders attend this CoP, which is disappointing as it is this group which has the ability to support the sector. It is important that we don't look to government for every solution but also appeal to funders.

Thandeka concluded this session and stated that through the ISF and Steering Committee, BRIDGE wants to engage further with government about the solutions that have been suggested at this CoP. BRIDGE will provide any feedback regarding this. BRIDGE also needs to bring together other advocacy groups in order to map some of the advocacy work that is taking place.

BRIDGE VIRTUAL COPs SURVEY RESULT

BRIDGE has been hosting fully virtual CoPs from April 2020 and we wanted to understand how these CoPs were performing. We sent out a survey to people who had attended virtual CoPs between April and mid-July 2020 and found:

- The preferred length of an online CoP is two hours.
- Most people thought CoPs should be open to as many people as can log on, although there were a number of strong comments about the drawbacks of large CoPs (over 40 people).
- The use of breakaway rooms for group discussion was generally seen as vital for active participation and engagement in alignment with CoP principles; it was stressed, however, that these need to be facilitated by prepared and pre-briefed participants.
- There was strong sense of loss around the networking that has traditionally occurred in BRIDGE face-to-face CoPs; while group work can enable this to some degree, the personal connections made at CoP meetings are lacking.
- There was general endorsement of how BRIDGE has grown in handling online CoP meetings, especially with reference to tools such as breakaway rooms and Jam Boards.

- In an effort to address shortcomings in previous CoPs, BRIDGE pre-identified facilitators for group work and allowed time on the platform for networking. BRIDGE will use the feedback on these efforts to improve future sessions. To read more about the survey and the views of CoP members, click [here](#).

USEFUL RESOURCES

Do More Foundation website - www.domore.org.za - an eclectic parenting support website that includes materials from UNICEF/DSD/DBE, SmartStart, Wordworks, Nal'ibali, Book Dash, African Storybook, WHO, Ntataise etc. The website is data free.

Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD) has done a 4 page summary of the ECD SOP: <https://cecd.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/sop-guidelines-summary-cecd.pdf>

SmartStart has provided brilliant resources for re-opening, free of charge: <https://www.smartstart.org.za/covid-19-resources-and-guides/>

Diaconia website free resources:

https://translate.googleusercontent.com/translate_c?depth=1&hl=en&prev=search&pto=aue&rurl=translate.google.com&sl=af&sp=nmt4&u=https://sacoronavirus.co.za/&usg=ALkJrhhoTJcXDG2SNnKIL8mUJhkhg7vNKQ

Wordworks makes materials available on a daily basis and these materials can be distributed via WhatsApp <https://homeliteracy.datafree.co/>.

Book Dash has a wealth of free resources <https://bookdash.org/>.

CLOSING

Mentimeter was used to do a quick survey on thoughts about the future of ECD. The lead question was 'What are the three main aspects of ECD provisioning that needed to be prioritised going forward?'. Inputs from participants will help shape future programmes and ensure that the ECD remains as relevant as possible.

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