

Mpumalanga Early Childhood Development Community of Practice Meeting Highlights 13 August 2020



SETTING THE SCENE

This was the first Mpumalanga ECD CoP virtual meeting and the first meeting of the year 2020. The purpose of the meeting was to understand what the Mpumalanga ECD community was experiencing since the official reopening of ECD programmes. Documenting the challenges that are on the ground and solutions that the ECD workforce and organisations are innovatively creating and employing is useful in sharing knowledge and working practice. Thulile Makofane, the ECD Programme Director at Penreach facilitated this session.



CONTEXT INTO THE MPUMALANGA ECD REOPENING LANDSCAPE

Mpumalanga ECD reopening processes

Tseli Scharer from Ntataise Lowveld Network, gave the attendees an account of how the process of verification of ECD sites in the province had been facilitated through a collaboration between the Mpumalanga Provincial Department of Social Development (DSD) and ECD organisations. The MP DSD is currently working three ECD organisations, namely; Ntataise Lowveld, Cotlands and Penreach, to assist ECD programmes to complete the self-assessment forms and in conducting verifications in the ECD sites to determine their level of readiness. Tseli informed the CoP that the provincial DSD team had reached out to these organisations and that the collaboration was exemplary of the ideal relationship between government and civil society that should exist. Challenges that Tseli reported through the verification process included:

- ECD centre managers are finding it difficult to understand the DsD Standard Operating Procedure and Guidelines (SoP)
- They are struggling to complete the self-assessment forms
- It was found that the majority of sites visited were not ready to reopen
- Cotlands reported that playgroups are ready to reopen

Tseli continued to explain where Ntataise had been allocated ECD programmes to assist and verify in the programme and also gave the CoP participants details about the **Ntataise Preopening of facilities**

and Capacity Building and Psychosocial Support- a three-day workshop aimed at ECD practitioners. This programme is currently in its pilot phase and explores the following:

Background of pandemic

Self-care of practitioner (emotional, social, spiritual, physical)

Self-care of employers to empower other staff members and children

Capacitating family members

Preparing children slowly and gradually for reopening

Supporting children's play and development learning

Planning requirements

BRIDGE ECD CoP engagements

Thandeka Rantsi, the BRIDGE ECD project manager provided the Mpumalanga ECD CoP members with a summary of activities that BRIDGE had been involved in at an individual level and in collaboration with other organisations in the last quarter. She explained that:

- BRIDGE had held a number of ECD CoPs to understand what would be required of ECD programmes to reopen in the C19 context. These have been captured in *BRIDGE ECD CoP Position Paper on the Reopening of ECD*
- BRIDGE participated in a research report: *The Plight of ECD Workforce*, this report was an account of over 3900 ECD practitioners' plight due to the pandemic and lack of access to financial relief
- BRIDGE, through the Intersectoral Forum (ISF), steering committee and the Collaboration of ECD Networks (CECDN) has engaged with the National directorate on a number of issues affecting the sector
- BRIDGE was part of the workstreams that worked together with the ECD Directorate to create a framework for reopening which ultimately led to the official documents issued by DSD for the reopening

Thandeka ended off by giving participants an idea of what has been happening in the sector, particularly in terms of advocacy and civil society combined efforts to see the sector reopened and supported.

Participant Input

Pastor Jeffrey, an ECD centre owner and chair of the 'Sikuhla ngolwati' ECD Forum gave the CoP participants an idea of what he had experienced. The centre is ready but they are experiencing financial challenges.

Florence, an ECD owner made a plea that the DSD tries to register ECD centres as much as possible so they can access the subsidy to support the ECD

Mr Mnisi, an official of the provincial Department of Education (DoE) in the province made an admission that the ECD workforce had not received enough support since the C19 pandemic. Assured the CoP, that the DOE was doing everything to bring back the ECD programmes to life. DoE and DSD had been together working on verifications along with the three ECD organisations that have been mentioned.

The CoP is reminded of BRIDGE’s knowledge management role. All meetings, presentations and discussions are captured and shared on BRIDGE’s Knowledge Hub, as are any other specific knowledge products relevant to ECD. [Here](#) is the link to this.



GROUP DISCUSSION-CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR ECD PROGRAMMES THAT HAVE REOPENED AND THOSE WHO HAVE NOT REOPENED

Thulile ushered the participants into a group discussion to understand what ECD programmes/part are experiencing on the ground. The group discussed challenges and solutions based on the following aspects:

‘Very few practitioners are willing to go back to work in the ECD sector. They have looked for jobs as cashiers, domestic workers etc. The onus rests with center managers who have to try and retain people who have not received a single stipend. The sector is quite despondent at the moment’ -Tseli Scharer

1. Financial Challenges

- A strong recommendation that DSD should provide a full subsidy instead of partial subsidy, particularly now as the ECD centres are struggling. This could help with the stipends for ECD practitioners.
- Additional cleaning people are also required to keep up with the C19 safety measures
- Social distancing measures and some parents being unable to pay fees impacts the centres’ operations negatively

2. Parental Engagement

- Parents are alarmed and see no reason to pay for children whilst the children are not going to the ECD centres-the effect is felt most negatively by the ECD practitioners
- Penreach adopted a new approach through home visting where they are sharing activities with parents to stimulate children. There is mentoring of ECD practitioners and centre managers through Whatsapp and assistance with reopening preparations.

3. DSD Processes

- The support package from DSD has not been made available. ECD programmes are ready but there is very limited support with regards to requirements to maintain health and safety standards.

- Funders have made money available for nutrition, funding for PPEs can open up ECD operations but there is very limited funding
- 4. Staff Engagement**
- Centre managers verified by the Ntataise Lowveld Network reported that they had been hard-hit. Very few practitioners are willing to go back to work in the ECD sector and have searched for jobs elsewhere.
 - A concern expressed around how many ECD practitioners will come back and will the ECD sector get the right people or those who are just trying to put bread on the table?
 - Resource training organisations (RTOs) have also lost those they have trained. Once playgroups and other programmes start, RTOs will have to recruit and train new people
- 5. Support from other organisations**
- Ntataise has been assisting through their funders, PPE in the form of sanitisers. They have notified the provincial DSD that things like thermometers are very expensive and are therefore engaging
 - Penreach has been supporting their Smartstarters with re-opening packs as a way of supporting their needs in this difficult time.

Question:

Is the plan to verify all ECD programmes in the province or just a sample?

Answer

The provincial plan is to verify all ECD programmes so that no child is left behind. About 90% of ECD centres in the province have been verified and the target is to verify all centres and programmes by end of August

Service providers (Ntataise, Penreach and Cotlands) have been informed by provincial DSD to start with all the registered ECD centres but the plan is to verify all ECD programmes

Way forward

To conclude the discussion, the provincial DoE officials gave some remarks and updates on a number of issues:

- There is no official date of reopening that will be announced. Mr Mnisi went further to say that after an ECD programme/facility had been verified and declared ready by an official, then they can open.
- DoE would focus their attention on supplying Learning and Teaching Support Material (LTSMs) to registered ECD sites. The identification of these ECD programmes/facilities would be done in partnership with DSD. A plea was made to the DoE that the NGOs be involved in the identification of the registered ECD programmes/facilities to avoid duplication or double dipping as some of these ECD programmes/facilities were already receiving support through network organisations such as Ntataise Lowveld.

- The DoE had identified 52 beneficiarties for the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) training that would be done at district level

CLOSURE

Thulile thanked the participants for the lively discussion on issues that were closely affecting all of us in ECD. In the checkout, people were generally relieved through this platform as it highlighted some critical issues around verification and the updates provided by the DoE. It was great to convene with people who shared the same challenges and anxieties. The date of the next meeting will be communicated in due course and participants were urged to express the topics that they would like discussed through this forum.

LIST OF PARTICPANTS

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