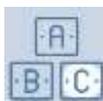**National Early Childhood Development Community of Practice**
Meeting Highlights 30 June 2022
Online: Zoom.US

SCENE SETTING

Patsy Pillay, KZN ECD CoP champion and facilitator welcomed delegates to the first National ECD CoP for the year. The CoP looked at two main items:

- A presentation on the Zero Draft Quality Assurance and Support System (QASS) for ECD in South Africa - designed by the Department of Social Development (DSD) and supported by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Ilifa Labantwana- with the aim of supporting continuous quality improvement for ECD programmes alongside ECD programme registration. The DBE is now leading this project since the function shift.
- GROW showcased their 'five steps to five-star strategy' which includes resources such as the GROW App, online learning modules and resource hub to support ECD centre owners/principals and teachers to run five-star ECD centres that are also financially sustainable small businesses.

The aim of the CoP is to come together as a network to share resources and collectively work together to achieve change in the sector.
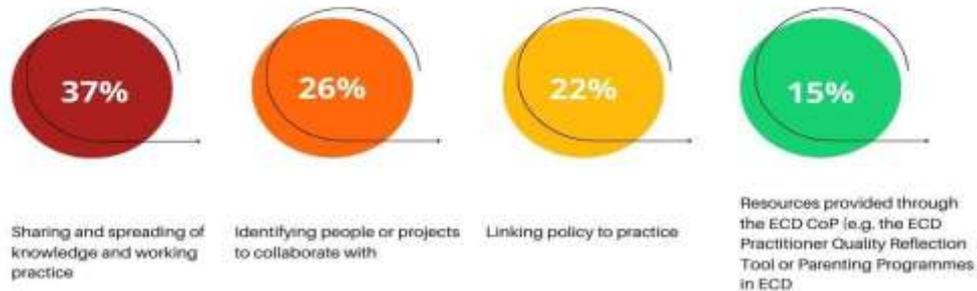
Thandeka Rantsi, ECD programme manager at BRIDGE took CoP members through key developments happening in the BRIDGE ECD Programme:

Convenings under the BRIDGE National ECD CoP	Partnerships & Collaborations
- Most recently the KZN CoP, looked at what a responsive training and development system looks like. - MP CoP in partnership with Penreach looked at the ECD function shift as it pertains to the province, from the Ehlanzeni District Department of Education (DoE) officials. - The WC CoP focused on monitoring and evaluation of early learning programmes.	- BRIDGE/LEGO Foundation webinar focused on "The practice of play in different contexts." - Health, Safety and Environmental norms and standards study conducted by Ilifa Labantwana & Equality Collective. - SmartStart's plan to facilitate ECD CoPs with community members in the Free State (Letsatsi Solar Park Trust)

Poll: To understand what benefits members are deriving from the CoP in line with BRIDGE outcomes, here is what they had to say:

WHICH BRIDGE COP OUTCOME IS OF THE GREATEST BENEFIT TO YOUR WORK?

Poll Results

37%
Sharing and spreading of knowledge and working practice

26%
Identifying people or projects to collaborate with

22%
Linking policy to practice

15%
Resources provided through the ECD CoP (e.g. the ECD Practitioner Quality Reflection Tool or Parenting Programmes in ECD

The poll only allowed participants to choose one answer but a number of participants noted that more than one option applied to them. As an example, Pam Picken who is a longstanding BRIDGE ECD CoP member mentioned that all four options applied to her work.

Simone's full presentation can be accessed via the recording here

PRESENTATION: Zero Draft Quality Assurance & Support System

Patsy touched on one of the objectives of the National Integrated ECD Policy of 2015 (NIECDP), which is to establish appropriate monitoring quality assurance and improvement systems to secure the provision of quality ECD services and outcomes for young children in South Africa. The policy informed the DSD supported by the DBE, and Ilifa Labantwana to design the Zero Draft QASS which aims to support continuous quality improvement for ECD programmes alongside ECD programme registrations. Continuing quality improvement should ideally establish a system that facilitates self-assessment processes, together with standardised external quality monitoring and support for all types of delivery models, and the ECD workforce. Patsy concluded by noting the Thrive by Five Index and the ECD census as tools highlighting the need to put measures in place to improve and monitor quality in the ECD sector.

Simone van Willingh, who is the Senior Manager for System Design and Development for Ilifa Labantwana, presented on the Zero Draft QASS.

The quality assurance system, which is informed by the NIECDP, reinforces the fact that registration alone is not a sufficient condition to guarantee the best levels of quality and to drive good child outcomes in ECD programmes even though registration is an important milestone in improving ECD. We need robust and effective systems that include registration support, quality assessment, targeted

training, coaching and mentoring, as well as monitoring and oversight. These make up the components of the quality assurance system. The programmes would need to be conditionally registered or fully registered to access the quality assurance system and the support system quality assessment standards and tools that have been developed to implement the system. There are also quality improvement and support plans that follow up on what has been done within the centres to improve quality and link centres to various interventions and support.

Research to determine incentives that can encourage ECD programmes to participate in the support package of services is currently happening. Potential incentives could be the provision of access to basic learning and teaching support in the classroom, based on the completion of a particular training course. Another way of incentivising ECD programmes could be issuing a quality certificate based on three levels where the centres could potentially be identified as level one, two or three. The long term vision is giving parents the ability to choose ECD programmes based on the quality of a particular programme, especially because it is a voluntary process, where ECD programmes get to decide whether they want to participate or not.

> Quality has been and remains a really serious issue. But unfortunately, we know it is not a simple problem to fix. And while there are no conditions of service, proper salaries, reporting system and monitoring, and so on. It is very difficult to know how to best address it - Pam Picken

According to Simone, quality learning generally looks at two variables and that is structural quality variables and process quality variables:

● Structural quality variables are the things that are sort of easier to assess and pick up on when you are walking into an ECD programme environment. This includes the physical environment, health and safety, equipment, materials and group characteristics.
● Process quality variables are harder to access, they need observation of interactions between the caregiver and child, a child with another child and programme characteristics. This is how the quality assurance system looks at quality learning within the system.

The principle underpinning the quality assurance system is utilising a developmental approach alongside a compliance system. When a quality assessment is done, it triggers a performance improvement plan.

The quality improvement principles include six domains, namely:
● The learning programme - differentiated by child age;
● Parent and community engagement;
● Nutrition and safety;
● Staffing;
● Inclusiveness; and
● Management and leadership

Within the six domains there are three levels, which include: (1) start-up, (2) establishing and (3) enhancing. The six domains are also based on existing policies and tools, international quality ratings

and local examples of good practice. The system is a rapid quality assessment that looks at how the sector can target support.

QASS Process

The QASS process can only happen on the back of the registration process. Different pathways depend on the outcome of the process. Depending on what level ECD centres are at, they get different support.
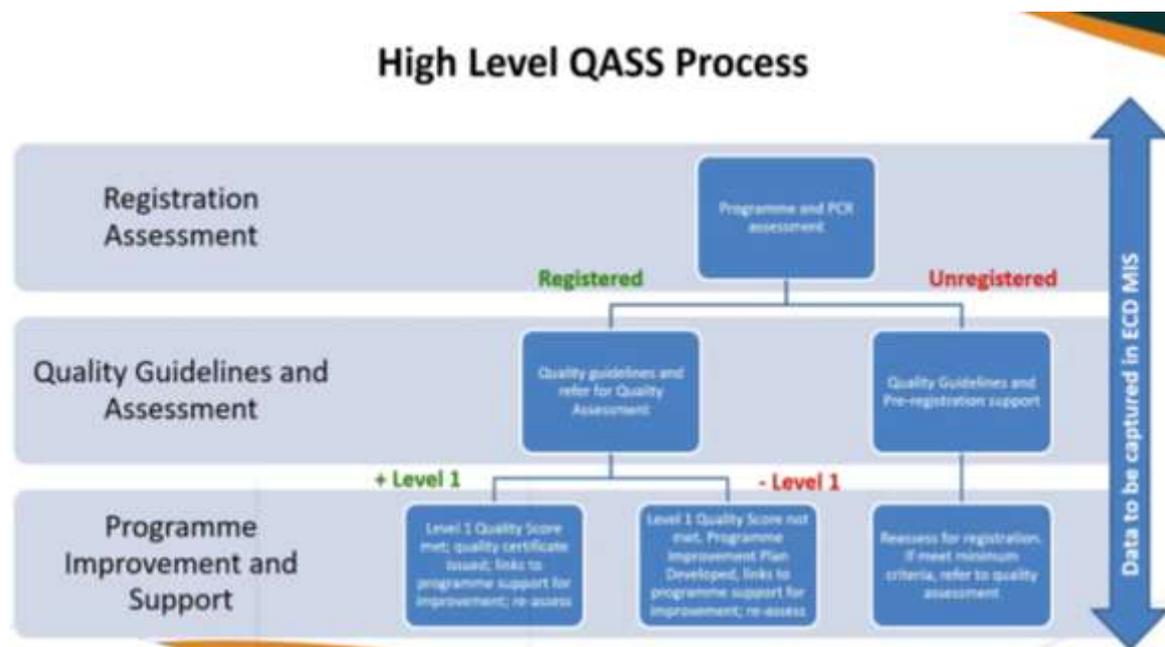
Quality Assurance System from a bird's eye view

The system moves to a programme improvement plan whether they meet the level one scoring or not, this is where a quality support worker will assist the ECD programme in developing this plan, as well as a self-evaluation plan that is left with the programme staff to determine whether their programme is improving or meeting a quality level.

A follow on from the improvement plan is the support interventions, outlining the necessary support that an ECD programme requires such as training and mentorship. This makes a strong case of leveraging existing resources and organisations, especially Resource and Training Organisations (RTOS) and ECD forums. The QASS will generally look at leveraging national and provincial, NGO networks and umbrella organisations to support capacity building.

ECD Communications Campaign

This is to communicate and avail information publicly for ECD programmes to access and do self-evaluations.
- One of the ways in which this can be done is to have available a self-evaluation template that indicates the measured ECD quality and service level made available publicly, perhaps on a website, for ECD programmes to determine the quality of their own programme.
- Another way could be through jamborees where NGOs, ECD forums and relevant structures share proactive communication about the QASS.

- The longer term vision is looking at the data that is collected from these quality assurance assessments' how the data can be disaggregated to identify particular trends available to national and district level DBE departments, for planning and designing specific communications campaigns that target ECD programmes potentially in a specific area.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Funding and costs

Q. Is there a budget approved for the system?

A. Budgets are incredibly tight at the moment with competing priorities both nationally and provincially, specifically within the DBE. There is no clarity in terms of what the resourcing allocation would look like thus far.

Human Resource and Role of RTOs

Q. Who exactly would be implementing the support package of the QASS?

A. A proposed recommendation is that there would be specific staff that would be associated with quality and support work, and that those could potentially be deployed from the DBE. In reality, the non-profit sector which is already doing quality and support work in ECD programmes could act as the support workers.

Q. There is no QA body such as uMalusi for schools, will the system be dependent on the ECD sector players themselves?

A. Currently the team has not looked at having an independent authority that would do verification of quality assessments, ensuring that training is done well, materials are developed for quality assessors and pass a certain standard before they are able to do assessments in the sector. The team is looking at ensuring that the quality assessors are highly trained and verified assessors rather than having an independent body as an arbiter for that work. Not that it would not change, but that is what is currently in the proposal. The assessors would work on a voluntary basis.

Q. Is quality assurance doable on a voluntary system?

A. The sector cannot continue to rely on volunteers. The system needs to be integrated into the DBE's responsibility for ECD with support for it. The suggestion is that the system be resourced, but there is a combination of things at play such as having the DBE contract the NPO sector in terms of resources. ECD programmes on the other hand need to volunteer to participate in the system as they are most likely to want to improve when not forced to do so.

Q. Was an audit done on the current resourcing of training organisations in the sector, as the last one was done in 2013 or is the team looking at redoing one?

A. The report definitely relied on the information from the 2013 audit of RTOs looking at the different types of skills development and aligned that to the work of the six domains in the quality and assurance and assessment tool. But a redo has not yet been considered.

Other

Q. Have parents' needs and wants been factored in the development of the system?

A. Parent and community involvement has been shown to be important in the functioning of a quality early learning programme. There are around seven or eight questions on that domain, which speak to how integrated the ECD programme is with the parent community. The idea is that parents would be

informed of what is happening in the early learning programmes and be allowed to give inputs into that process.

Q. Khulisa Management Services assisted the DBE in developing an ECD Monitoring Tool in 2019 and trained district officials from all provinces on how to use it. The idea was to help officials rate ECD centers and provide targeted support to centres based on different domains similar to the ones presented (health, nutrition, classroom management, implementation of play based learning, etc.) How does this quality tool differ from the ECD Monitoring Tool?

A. The Khulisa report was looked at in the research which was in the early phases of the project. Pre-existing tools, policies and research were looked at as a synthesis to compile the report. The team had to look at an instrument that could be reasonably delivered at scale and certain criterions had to be looked at in order to do that.

Q. Is the tool applicable in Home-Based Parent Orientated ECD Programmes?

A. The tool does not cover child minders at this point in time but it does cover group learning programmes, that would be centre and non-centre based including playgroups.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CoP PARTICIPANTS

> "Training in and of itself, doesn't necessarily lead to quality. Research shows that it's the ongoing monitoring and support on site at ECD programmes that really can have a dramatic effect on improving quality."

- The QASS process should be accompanied by a strong ongoing mentoring and support function based on the research that has proved that training alone of ECD practitioners does not determine quality of ECD outcomes.
- DBE should kindly consider including practitioners with a certain minimum qualification level (potentially NQF level four) as part of the department's PERSAL system in an effort to increase quality. This would ensure that practitioners form part of the DBE's formal performance management systems which would improve working conditions and strengthen accountability measures. Other operational costs of the ECD programmes would be covered by communities and parents-this is a model used by other countries.
- RTOs are well placed to perform the QA role because they have the expertise and proven support mechanisms. This would require an audit of RTOs as the last one was conducted in 2013. The Western Cape provincial partnership with the RTOs and other NPOs (Social Services Organisations) is one model to learn from.
- Ideally, the QASS should be budgeted for alongside other key areas that DBE has identified in improving the function of ECD at least in the medium term. In light of the 'Thrive by Five' report, it would be a disservice if the QASS was not budgeted for.
- The use of volunteers in conducting quality assurance is strongly opposed because it is a key function in ensuring access to quality learning for young children. It is understood that budget is a major constraint and in the interim, volunteers could serve a need, however, it is strongly recommended that experienced cadres of the sector are harnessed in supporting DBE with quality assurance.

SHOWCASE: GROW Educare Centres 5 Steps to 5 Star ECD Programmes

Lyndsey, the Head of Partnerships in the National Office at GROW took participants through the 'GROW five steps to five-star strategy'. GROW is a non-profit enterprise responsible for building networks for impact and ensuring that an ecosystem for innovation scaling is created in the ECD sector.

According to Lyndsey, GROW's vision is to provide five-star early learning in every neighbourhood in South Africa, with the aim of unlocking human potential. Human potential refers to the inherent potential in every child and also the potential in every teacher and principal, to embark on their own professional development journey.

GROW provides direct support to ECD centre owners or principals and teachers to run ECD centres and partner with other organisations who share the same vision of a more collaborative ECD sector. The organisation believes that to achieve impact at scale requires the prioritisation of purpose in the sector, meaning that the sector should not

> **"It takes a village to raise a child and it takes an ecosystem to scale an innovation."**

get caught up in their own organisational success, but spread impact beyond organisational boundaries. GROW has done this by making their platform, which was originally designed as an internal tool, freely available to the sector.

The technology platform allows for real time insight into data, sharing of content and more. It is appealing to organisations who want to provide infrastructure upgrades to centres or who want to provide nutrition support and content more broadly. The functionality has enabled partnerships and collaboration and created an ecosystem of support around ECD centres. What has been exciting is the inclusion of new players into the sector who are interested in supporting ECD, drawing resources from related sectors.

Through effective partnerships GROW is working towards the following four goals:
- The quality provided by, and sustainability of the ECD sector increases.
- Motivate for more funding and see an increased diversification of funding sources.
- Ecosystem partners share resources and data to develop best practice and to advocate for the sector.
- Ecosystem partners align on common standards and measure collective progress.

GROW launched their 'five steps to a five-star' strategy in 2021. The difference between it and what the organisation was doing before, is that ECD centres and other stakeholders can embark on a development journey fit for purpose and unique to them. It is about making as many resources available to ECD centres as possible in the most effective way.

The five steps to a five star ECD programme are:

1. Core Technology Tools and Training-this includes the GROW App and other technology products which are freely available.
2. Quality Education Programme-through cash or a combination of a loan and grant, ECD centers are provided access to the GROW kit, curriculum or daily programme, which comes with education and mentorship.
3. Registration support (including infrastructure)-may come with access to finances for infrastructure, with the main focus being on increasing the business savviness of the ECD centre principals and helping them think about breaking even and sustainability.
4. Quality Assurance.
5. GROW branding-this entails becoming a GROW partner if an ECD center would like.

Step 1-Core Technology Tools and Training

Sheila Chikoki, the GROW Regional Implementation Manager for the Western Cape went through a deep dive of GROW's offering and technology platform process which consists of an app and an online learning system. The GROW apps and technology tools were created with the objective of having a standardised systematic approach towards the delivery of quality early learning services. The app is basically like a one stop shop, where an ECD owner can recreate their physical classroom or school on an online platform. This is where they would be able to do all their administration for learners and staff, tracking compliance and reporting, have their financial bookkeeping on the palm of their hands, do learner assessments, teacher competency, business performance and check the overall performance of the ECD centre against the quality of service that they are offering.

It is also an essential communication tool between the owner and teachers, teachers and parents (see slide below for example of each). The app is a zero rated site, meaning it can be accessed without data.

Attached to the app is an online learning platform where teachers are able to continuously develop themselves by going through some modules which are very practical and can help them better

understand how they need to go about the development of children. The platform also has an interactive curriculum, targeted for children between the ages of two to five years. It gives a more interactive and practical way of what a teacher needs to do as opposed to just going through a book on how to go about the activities. The interactive curriculum platform has videos, voice notes and pictures.

What one can find throughout the three apps, is the resources hub which has policies and procedures, forms and templates, information on professional development, information on how to register your centre, how to use the apps themselves, how to market your ECD centre, information on how to communicate with parents. It functions as an online library with the aim of saving time by having access to all things ECD on one portal.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q. Are ECD centres who are based in rural areas-mostly operating as community based non-profit organisations and business and who are not able to apply for the DSD subsidy- excluded from GROW's tools?

A. GROW's strength is in partnering with ECD centres who want to run as businesses. It is about making the functionality available to any partner who wants to see ways in which they can make it work for them.

Q. How can people use the GROW App concerning the lack of access to data and cost?

A. The app has an offline mode meaning without data, one cannot access the platform but can still use some of its functions. ECD programmes working offline would need to log on to the platform via internet at least once week to sync their work to the platform.

Q. Is the app also available for non-GROW ECD centres?

A. The GROW App functionality is a step one, meaning you can use the app to download resources, access certain online training modules, etc. It is available to everybody for free. The only time that there's a cost and another set of functionalities opens up is if you want to purchase the GROW kit and the GROW curriculum.

Q. What is the membership fee for GROW's kit and curriculum?

A. There is no membership fee, per se, it was a membership fee when it was previously in the franchise model. When someone shows interest in the quality education programme, GROW conducts a breakeven analysis of the business to see whether they would be able to make such an investment. Centres pay R1300 for 30 children over three years.

Q. Which languages is the app available in and how does child assessment work?

A. Currently the app is only available in English, with some future plans in place to make it available in other languages as it has come up in conversations with stakeholders and users. As of now there are assessments available on the app for learners from between two years to five years with questions embedded within the app. Assessments include a set of questions for two to three year olds, a set for three to four year five year olds and for an older age group. Teachers can assess the learner individually or in groups for different developmental areas. The app can generate reports after assessments have been completed with the ability to make comments, which can be downloaded and shared with parents for each child's reference.

Q. Is the app available on the iOS platform?

A. The app is available in Android only at this stage.

Q. Who designed the child assessment tools, have they been nationally standardised and how do they link to ELOM? Are they available if you are not on step two of the GROW programme?

A. The tool was developed internally by GROW's Head of Education (Lisa Voortman) in collaboration with others accessing available resources. The tool is distinct from ELOM in that it does not require a trained assessor, it is a teacher tool. The teacher is trained in app skills to perform the assessments and share reports with parents via the app. The intention is to use it twice a year to gauge a child's progress. It is available to use on different programmes. The tool provides an overall indicator of where the children are and gives some sort of advice to the teacher and the parents on what areas should be concentrated on. The priority was to make an accessible tool. GROW's curriculum is NCF and CAPS aligned.

CLOSING AND CHECKOUT

Patsy closed off the meeting by highlighting the different sessions, the first one being a presentation on the Zero Draft QASS with a few recommendations made by participants and a showcase from GROW on their five step strategy to a five star programme to help ECD centres grow themselves. The next National ECD CoP is scheduled for Thursday, 15 September 2022.

Useful Resources Shared
The date for submission of the BELA bill has been extended to the 15th of August BELA Bill submission template from Real Reform GROW Quality Education Programme Summary of the ECD Census Link to National ECD CoP recording For a demo from GROW Educare email info@growecd.org.za

PARTICIPANT LIST

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Dharshni Naidoo	New Beginnings Training & Development Org
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Matshediso Lekgetho	University of Pretoria
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Modupi Mazibuko	Penreach
Mpho Moleko	Education Africa
Nontobeko Madube	MDF
Nontokozo Kunene	COUNT
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Ruby Motaung	Training and Resources in Early Education (TREE)
SB Drew	Saide
Selwyn Swartz	STERKSTROOM SCHOOL
Sheilah Chikoki	GROW Educare Centres
Simone Van Willingh	Ilifa Labantwana
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Boitumelo Erasmus	BRIDGE

The CoP is reminded of BRIDGE's knowledge management role. All meetings, presentations and discussions are captured and shared on BRIDGE's Knowledge Hub. Here is the link.