



Research on Socio-Economic Policy

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Rethinking pre-grade R

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Across all research disciplines there is now widespread agreement that investment in early childhood development (ECD) brings high returns and can help close the gap between children from rich and poor households. Over the past decade grade R (the year before grade 1) has been the strongest policy lever used by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to improve early learning. The National Development Plan (NDP) has, however, called for universal access to two years of early childhood development prior to entering grade 1.

This brief is based on a study in which I analysed the available nationally representative datasets to identify the current participation trends of four and five year olds in early education institutions, the supply-side constraints to delivering a high-quality pre-Grade R year, and the challenges of implementing a universally accessible pre-grade R.¹

1. Policy issues

Worldwide there is growing recognition of the importance of the early years of a child's life for social, emotional and cognitive development. Recognising the importance of this period, the NDP proposes the introduction of a universally accessible pre-grade R, so that at least 75% of South Africa's four and five year olds can participate in formal early childhood care and education (ECCE) by 2024. However, for this additional year of pre-school education to have the intended benefits, it is crucial to understand the constraints that might prevent the delivery of a high-quality, well-functioning pre-grade R.

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¹ Kotzé, J., 'The readiness of the South African education system for pre-grade R', *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 5, 2, 2015.

2. What do we still need to know about ECD in South Africa?

Despite the large body of research in South Africa on ECD, little quantitative research has been done on the South African context in which this additional year of pre-school will be rolled out, nor on the demand for such a service. Identifying the constraints in the ECD sector therefore requires a systematic quantitative overview of the sector.

A recent paper investigates three urgent issues: the current and projected participation trends of four year olds and what will be needed to reach the vision of universal access, the quality of the supply of ECD services, and the challenges of implementing a universally accessible pre-grade R.²

3. Key findings

What proportion of South African children are participating in ECCE currently?

The first trend which is useful to consider is the progression of general participation of four year olds in any ECD programme over the past 10 years. Figure 1 uses General Household Survey (GHS) data to compare the overall net enrolment rates of children in any institution of education or early childhood care over the period 2003 to 2013. It shows that there has been an increase in participation rates in all the age groups, with the largest increase being among the four year olds (38%).

In 2013, 64% of four year olds and 81% of five year olds in South Africa attended an education institution.

It is unclear exactly how many four year olds are not participating in any form of ECCE, but a conservative estimate would be approximately 28%, i.e. about 300,000 children.

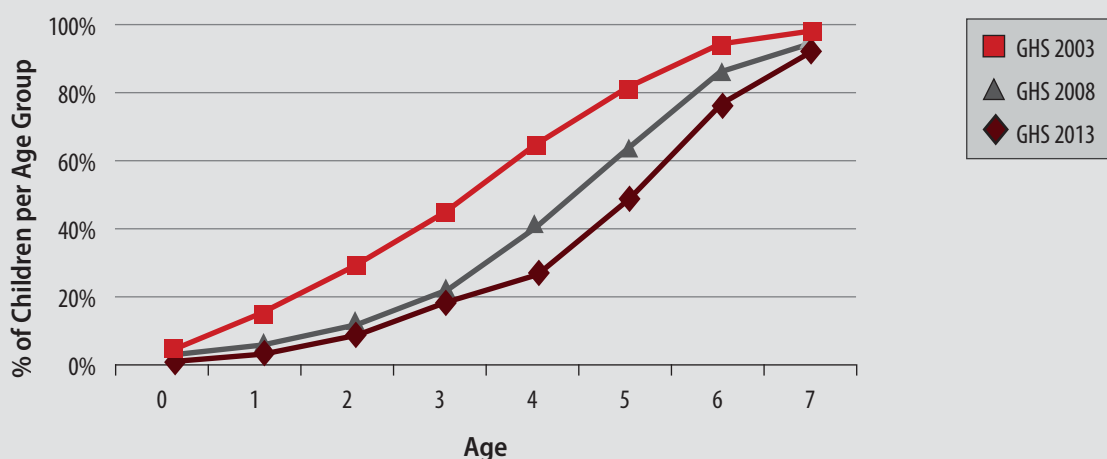


FIGURE 1: Overall enrolment rates of children in any education institution

Source: General Household Surveys (2003, 2008, 2013)

Notes: The categories considered in the calculations are primary schools, grade R, pre-schools, crèches and ECD centres.

Are the ECD centres conducive to learning?

The recently conducted ECD Audit of 2013 provides helpful insights into the state of South African ECD facilities. One in five ECD centres are battling with inadequate drinking water supply, one in four have inadequate electricity supply and a quarter of them struggle with inadequate ablution facilities. The prevalence of these infrastructural inadequacies differs between provinces, with ECD centres in Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape being the worst off. Moreover, the lack of learning and teaching support materials is widespread and centres in these same provinces are the most in need of additional resources.

Improving these conditions is no easy feat since ECD centres only receive a basic subsidy of R15 per day for each child that passes the means test. This must cover all salaries, infrastructure expenses, equipment acquisitions and two meals a day for each child. In contrast, ordinary no-fee schools receive a third of this amount, and only for non-personnel spending.

Do ECD practitioners have sufficient training?

Another feature of the current state of ECD centres is the general low level of ECD practitioners' qualifications. Figure 2 shows that only 10% have a qualification over and above matric, and only 25% have received some training in ECD. The entry requirements to become an ECD practitioner in South Africa are very low and it is evident that ECD centres are not at present implementing norms and standards prescribed by government. Although qualifications are not mandatory for good quality teaching, it is critical to ensure that practitioners are aware of the importance and complexity of both cognitive and non-cognitive stimulation for the development of young children. It is therefore vital to ensure that these practitioners are taught the skills they need to be more effective.

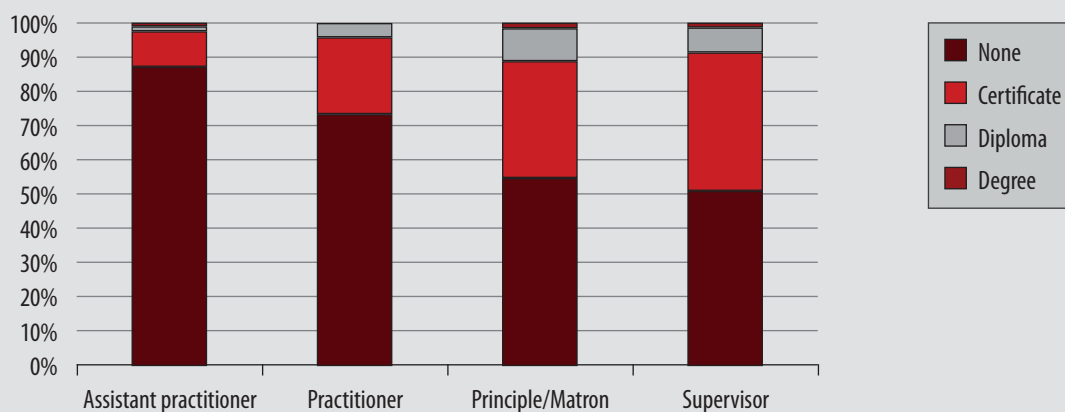


FIGURE 2: Training received in early childhood development (ECD)

Source: 2013 ECD Audit

Notes: The sample is not necessarily nationally representative, but rather representative of all teachers who participated in the national audit.

Do ECD practitioners earn a fair income?

An ECD practitioner with a post-matric diploma or degree earns the same as an ECD practitioner without these qualifications. The average monthly salary of an ECD practitioner is startlingly low and even more so for one who has a diploma or a degree. Regardless of the practitioner's qualifications or position at an ECD centre, on average the salary ranges from R1400 to R2000 per month and does not include any benefits such as pension fund, medical aid or housing subsidy.

In 2013 the average grade R teacher at a primary school earned R5000 per month, although the DBE salary scales made provision for a Foundation Phase (grades 1 to 3) teacher with a relative education qualification value (REQV) of 14 and above to receive an entry level state salary of R185,184 per annum, excluding benefits. This amounts to R 21,141 per month if we include the 37% benefits comprising pension, medical aid and housing subsidy.

Thus, as Figure 3 shows, a Foundation Phase teacher earns almost ten times more than the average ECD practitioner. The unfairness is apparent when we consider that a person with a degree who teaches grade R earns ten times less than someone with exactly the same qualification who teaches grades 1 to 3. To put it another way, a Foundation Phase teacher who teaches children aged 7 earns ten times more than an ECD teacher who teaches children aged 6.

The implications of this unjust salary scale are a matter for serious concern.

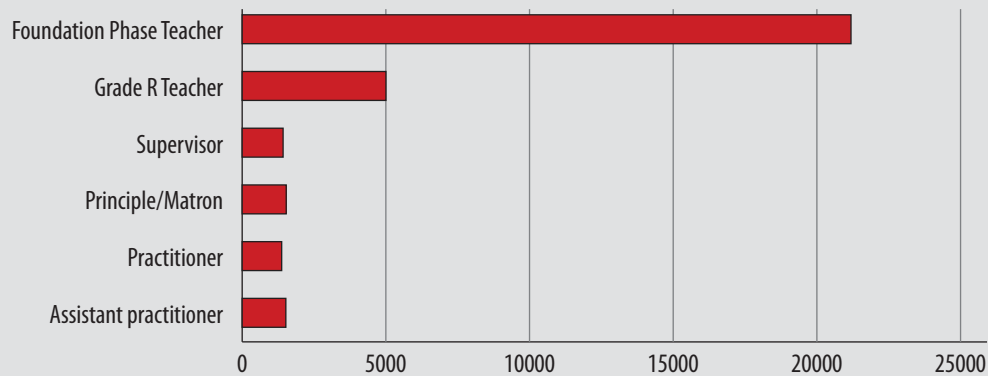


FIGURE 3: Comparison of salaries

Source: 2013 ECD Audit – ECD practitioner salaries; Lesufi – grade R salaries; Barry – foundation phase salaries.³

Notes: The average salary is based on a rough estimate of grade R practitioner salaries, since their salaries are determined on a provincial level, or sometimes even at a school level.

Is the policy environment conducive to delivering good ECCE?

Finally, the policy space in which the ECD sector currently finds itself does not reflect the importance of this sector for future development and is not conducive to the proper implementation of a pre-grade R year. Implementing an additional year of early childhood care and education will not have the expected (and much needed) impact if it will only be of the same quality as the current grade R. Other research⁴ on grade R in South Africa has shown very few cognitive benefits to grade R as it is currently implemented, with researchers pointing to the low quality of education offered in this grade. ECD first has to become a core function within government, and resources (both financial and human) and authority structures need to reflect this at national, provincial and district level.

4. Policy implications

1. Extensive investment in infrastructure and learning and teaching support material will be necessary regardless of whether pre-grade R will be implemented in primary schools or in ECD centres. Among other things, this will entail helping unregistered and conditionally registered ECD centres to attain the required health and safety standards.
2. Large-scale capacity building will be required among the national and provincial departments and districts. Sufficient staffing and ECD expertise is required on all three levels to ensure that ECD centres and practitioners receive the necessary professional support in implementing a pre-grade R curriculum.
3. An entire teaching force will need to be trained and provided with the vital skills to unlock young children's potential.
4. Significant additional funding needs to be made available for practitioners. Given the lack of training and qualifications, however, additional funding could be linked to compulsory training and a practical qualification.
5. The policy space in which the ECD sector is positioned needs to be clarified. The current situation where the responsibility for ECD is spread over multiple departments lends itself to perverse incentives, abdication of responsibility and communication failures. Designing an organisational structure which will provide exceptional leadership and guidance on governance and accountability issues is complex as it needs to have sufficient capacity, authority and funding. The draft ECD policy proposes an inter-sectoral ECD agency to coordinate all the functions that comprise ECD, but whether this is the most appropriate way to do this is still open for debate. What is essential, however, is to establish the policy space of the ECD sector with proper leadership and authority. The quality of pre-grade R is inextricably linked to the policy environment in which it is situated.

³ Lesufi, P, 'Grade R Teacher to get salary hikes in Gauteng', SABC News, 28 September 2014. www.sabc.co.za/news/a/86b7c08045a2ecfe8b1e8b90ca3f4715/Grade-R-teachers-to-get-salary-hikes-in-Gauteng-20142809; Barry, H., 'Teacher salaries: Who earns more? Private versus public schools', Moneyweb, 14 January 2014. www.moneyweb.co.za/archive/teacher-salaries-who-earns-more/

⁴ Van der Berg et al., *The Impact of the Introduction of Grade R on Learning Outcomes*, Report prepared by the Department of Economics, Stellenbosch University, for the DBE and the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation in the Presidency, 2013. www.education.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=V9jnHEFjwJl%3D&tabid=741&mid=3028