

# FOSTERING MEANINGFUL FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SECTOR IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## Executive summary

The Republic of South Africa has made notable investments in the early childhood development (ECD) sector over the past two decades to promote a comprehensive multisectoral approach that promotes nutrition, learning, development, and well-being for all young children and their families.<sup>1</sup> ECD in South Africa officially spans children birth through age 6.<sup>2</sup> Families play a central role in ensuring young children receive the care, safety, and stimulation necessary for healthy development.<sup>3</sup> Yet there has been insufficient attention to the role of families in their children's learning and development in the ECD sector. In national policies and frameworks, families are positioned as critical actors, but there is little clarity or formalization of roles for parents/caregivers in the centers providing ECD.<sup>4</sup>

Strong family, school, and community partnerships are crucial for ensuring access to high-quality ECD. This policy report presents key findings on how families are positioned in South Africa's key ECD frameworks and provides recommendations on promoting more intentional and meaningful roles for families and to ensure mutual responsibility in early learning and development. This report focuses on education for children ages 3 to 5 in ECD centers, but the findings and recommendations can be applied to younger children. The primary audiences for this policy report are leaders in the Department of Basic Education as well as ECD providers.<sup>5</sup>

1 Department of Social Development, *National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy 2015* (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2012). 2

2 Department of Social Development, RSA, 2012; World Health Organization, UNICEF, and World Bank, *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development: A Framework for Helping Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential* (World Health Organization, 2018).

3 Maureen M. Black et al., "Early Childhood Development Coming of Age: Science through the Life Course," *The Lancet* 389, no. 10064 (2017): 77–90, [http://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)31389-7](http://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)31389-7).

4 DBE, *South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programs* (RSA, 2023); Department of Social Development, 2012.

5 DBE, *Keynote address by Hon. Ms Siviwe Gwarube, MP Minister of Basic Education, South Africa G20 ECCE Seminar* (RSA, 2025a).

Findings are based on policy analyses of seven key national education frameworks and highlight the different roles and responsibilities ascribed to families in supporting their children’s early learning and development. Additionally, findings reflect the mixed-methods research conducted in the Western Cape district led by Mikhulu Child Development Trust (“Mikhulu”), a civil society organization working in the ECD sector in collaboration with the Center for Universal Education (CUE). This research used the Conversation Starter Tools approach, a participatory community-driven methodology, which includes surveys and focus group discussions with families and educators and identifies concrete barriers and opportunities for parental/caregiver engagement in ECD centers.

This report begins with introductions to the ECD sector and family engagement in South Africa, followed by a description of the research design. Finally, three key findings and recommendations, as outlined in Table 1, are presented with strategies and tools for how to promote family partnerships in ECD centers.

**TABLE 1**

**Findings and recommendations**

Findings	Recommendations
<b>For the Department of Basic Education</b>	
1. South Africa has a clear definition and framework to guide family, school, and community partnerships in primary and secondary levels but not yet in ECD.	1. Expand the definition and framework for family, school, and community partnerships in primary and secondary education to include ECD. Ensure that ECD policies and plans include comprehensive approaches to family partnerships.
<b>For the Department of Basic Education and Early Learning Program (ELP) providers</b>	
2. Play-based learning is central in the ECD approach to early instruction and integral to national curricula and frameworks, but families and educators are unclear about how play-based learning supports the development of children’s foundational academic skills.	2. Create opportunities for families and educators to experience and discuss how play-based learning supports academic growth, as well as social and emotional development, and receive the tools to facilitate learning at home and at ECD centers in ways that complement one another.
3. Families and educators reported strong mutual trust. For families and educators, this trust was often passive, where their beliefs on the roles and responsibilities in a child’s learning and development were compartmentalized rather than collaborative.	3. Share tools and strategies that ECD centers can use to build meaningful communication and partnerships with families and transform centers into more family-friendly spaces that encourage mutual responsibility.

# Introduction to early childhood development and educational provision in South Africa

Early childhood development (ECD) is recognized as a fundamental right of every child, intended to promote holistic development, lifelong learning, and health. South Africa, as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is committed to providing universal access to ECD.<sup>6</sup> However, as of 2025, compulsory basic education starts at Grade R (age 6), or Reception Year, and extends through Grade 9 (age 15) but does not yet include pre-primary grades. The Government of South Africa defines ECD programs as those that “provide one or more forms of daily care, development, early learning opportunities and support to children from birth until the year before they enter formal school”<sup>7</sup> at age 6.

ECD includes a wide array of multisectoral programs that promote health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, and education. The educational component of ECD has been designated to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) since 2022, which provides oversight for children ages 3 to 5 years as well as Grade R (age 6), prior to Grade 1.<sup>8</sup> ELPs were previously overseen by the Department of Social Development. This shift in oversight signals efforts to more closely align ELPs to basic education.<sup>9</sup>

Access to ELPs is critical to ensuring that children can master the skills needed for primary school success. Children attending ELPs are better able to master developmental milestones, including cognitive, numeracy, literacy, and language skills, as well as social and emotional competencies, and are better prepared for formal education.<sup>10</sup> Although access to ECD has increased in the last several years, close to 30% of children across South Africa do not attend any form of ELP, and access varies greatly by province and socioeconomic status. Children from low-income households are less likely to attend ELPs; roughly half (58%) of children from low-income households attend ELPs compared to 88% of children from high-income households.<sup>11</sup>

There are three main types of ELPs: 1) ECD centers run by nonprofit or private entities, 2) homes of home-care providers, and 3) homes of families through play groups. Prior to the 2024 Basic Education Laws Amendment, one-quarter of children (22.6%) between the ages of 3 to 5 were enrolled in Grade R in formal primary schools. However, this is no longer the case as Grade R students are required to be at least 5 years old.<sup>12</sup>

6 UN General Assembly, Resolution 217A (III), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, A/RES/217(III) (December 10, 1948), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

7 Department of Social Development, 2012, 12.

8 RSA, *Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act* (RSA 2024).

9 DBE, *South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes* (RSA, 2023).

10 Sonja Giese et al., *Thrive by Five Index 2024: National Findings* (DataDrive2030, 2025).

11 DBE, *Baseline Technical Report* (Government of South Africa, 2022a).

12 DBE, *ECD Census 2021* (RSA, 2022b).

TABLE 2

**ELP enrollment by provider type**

Provider	Number enrolled	% of enrolled
Not enrolled in ELP (out-of-school)	1,062,000	30.0%
Formal school (enrolled in Grade R before age 6)	802,000	22.6%
ECD centers (nonprofit or private)	1,582,000	44.6%
Home-care providers	62,000	1.8%
Family play groups	4,000	0.1%
Other / unspecified ELP	32,000	0.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,544,000</b>	<b>100%</b>

**SOURCE:** DBE, *ECD Census 2021* (RSA, 2022); Statistics South Africa, *General Household Survey 2022* (RSA, 2022).

Nonprofit or private ECD centers are operated and supported by community-based nonprofit organizations, such as Mikhulu, or by national organizations, such as SmartStart. The majority of these ECD centers (69%) are run by a single entity, as compared to 31% that are run by a larger network of providers.<sup>13</sup> A small proportion of children receive ELP through home-care providers, also known as daymothers and childminders, “who provide care and early learning for up to six children, typically in their own homes.”<sup>14</sup> Some children attend family playgroups in their homes or other spaces in the community, “usually accompanied by their mothers and/or fathers or primary caregivers, and supervised by a voluntary or paid playgroup facilitator.”<sup>15</sup>

Lack of public provision and funding places financial burdens on families and providers. For example, only one in every three ECD centers receives a government subsidy. This government subsidy tends to be very small, covers few expenses, and does not significantly offset costs to families. Consequently, nearly all ECD centers (94%) charge tuition fees. ECD centers are often run by women who are paid low salaries, do not have requisite qualifications, and have few opportunities for training and professional development.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, there is high attrition as ECD educators seek better paying job opportunities. As a result of high turnovers, as conversations with families and educators alike described in this research, it is difficult to build authentic relationships with diverse families.

<sup>13</sup> DBE, 2022b.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Social Development, 2012, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Social Development, 2012, 13.

<sup>16</sup> DBE, 2022b; Lesley Wood and Marinda Neethling, “Professionalising ECCE in South Africa is Not Child’s Play! Determining Skills Gaps and Implications for Future Sector Development,” *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (2024): 86-100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2241119>.

# Family, school, and community engagement (FSCE) in the ECD sector in South Africa

## DEFINING FSCE IN ECD

Young children experience significant growth and brain development during early years and benefit from structured ECD.<sup>17</sup> Families play a pivotal role in providing a safe and loving environment and nurturing care, as well as early stimulation and interactions that promote healthy physical, cognitive, and psychological development and well-being.<sup>18</sup> Box 1 provides a definition of FSCE across age levels and its importance in children's learning and development.

### BOX 1

## The importance of FSCE<sup>19</sup>

Family, school, and community engagement encompasses the many ways that families, educators, and community groups work together to promote student learning and development.<sup>20</sup> Families include all individuals who play a leading role in caregiving and educating their children, including caregivers, guardians, and extended family members—from grandparents to aunts, uncles, or cousins. Family includes those who participate in the caregiving of a child beyond biological relationships.

While family, school, and community engagement varies depending on the context, the intention is to support greater collaborations and partnerships that ensure teaching and learning is equitable, inclusive, high-quality, and relevant. When there are strong home and school partnerships, families feel included and welcomed and are better equipped to support their children's learning and collaborate with schools.<sup>21</sup> Educators also benefit from strong family, school, and community partnerships. When they view families as valuable assets rather than barriers to collaboration, they experience greater professional satisfaction and success. Partnerships also strengthen education systems, as they create the conditions necessary for meaningful and sustainable reforms and transformations.<sup>22</sup>

17 Margaret Burchinal et al., "Relating Early Care and Education Quality to Preschool Outcomes: The Same or Different Models for Different Outcomes?," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 55 (2021): 35-51, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2020.10.005>; Meghan E. McDoniel et al., "Widely Used Measures of Classroom Quality are Largely Unrelated to Preschool Skill Development," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 59 (2022): 243-253, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.12.005>; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC), *The Science of Early Childhood Development* (NSCDC, 2007), [https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Science\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Development.pdf](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Science_Early_Childhood_Development.pdf).

18 Maureen M. Black et al., "Early Childhood Development Coming of Age: Science through the Life Course," *The Lancet* 389, no. 10064 (2017): 77-90, [http://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)31389-7](http://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)31389-7).

19 The definition language in Box 1 is consistent across all of the publications in the series "Policy Recommendations on Building Family-centered Education Systems." Additional common language includes Box 2, the description of the Conversation Starter Tools Methodology. Original source is Emily M. Morris and Laura Nóra, *Six Global Lessons on How Family, School, and Community Engagement Can Transform Education* (Brookings Institution, 2024).

20 Geert Driessen et al., "Parental Involvement and Educational Achievement," *British Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 4 (2005): 509-32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920500148713>; Leilane Henriette Barreto Chiappetta-Santana et al., "Learning Motivation, Socioemotional Skills and School Achievement in Elementary School Students," *Paideia Ribeirão Preto* 32, (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-4327e3232>; Mauricio Saracostti et al., "Influence of Family Involvement and Children's Socioemotional Development on the Learning Outcomes of Chilean Students," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10, (2019): 335, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00335>; Abdul Waheed Mughal et al., "Perspectives of Dropped-Out Children on Their Dropping Out from Public Secondary Schools in Rural Pakistan," *International Journal of Educational Development* 66, (2019): 52-61, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2019.02.004>; Loizos Symeou et al., "Dropping out of High School in Cyprus: Do Parents and the Family Matter?," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 19, no 1 (2012): 113-31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2012.717899>.

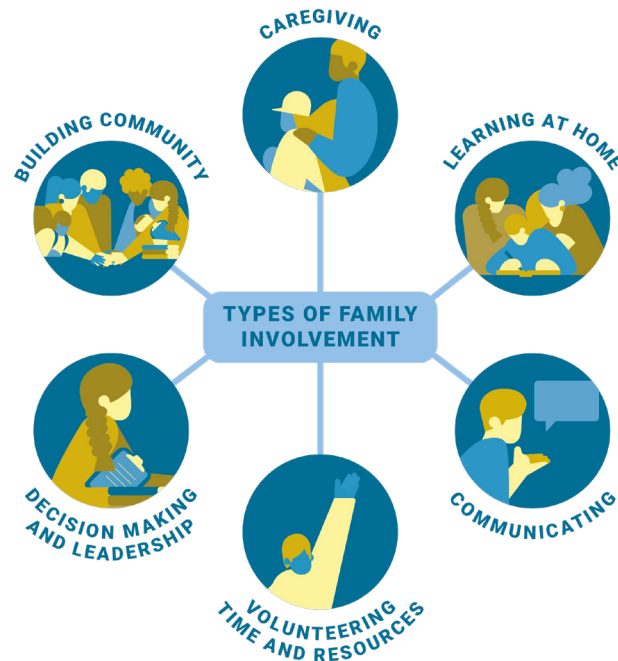
21 Shulamit Natan Ritblatt et al., "Creating Connections with Families of Young Children Using Trauma-Informed Approaches." In *Family Community Partnerships: Promising Practices for Teachers and Teacher Educators*, ed. Margaret Caspe and Reyna Hernandez (Information Age Publishing, 2023).

22 Rebecca Winthrop et al., *Collaborating to Transform and Improve Education Systems: A Playbook for Family-School Engagement* (Brookings Institution, 2021).

In South Africa's ECD sector, FSCE is often synonymous with caregiving and supporting early learning at home. Caregiving or nurturing care refers to keeping young children healthy, safe, and well nourished, whereas supporting learning at home for small children encompasses a range of different activities such as practicing the alphabet, dialogic reading, playing, singing rhymes, counting together, and other early literacy and math learning.<sup>23</sup> As shown in Figure 1 there are four other forms of family involvement and engagement beyond caregiving and supporting learning at home, namely communicating with educators, volunteering time and resources, building community, and participating in decision making and leadership, that occur in schools and ECD centers.<sup>24</sup>

FIGURE 1

## Types of family involvement and engagement



Strong partnerships between families and ECD providers ensure children are mastering cognitive, social and emotional, literacy, and language skills and getting the early intervention they need.<sup>25</sup> Regular communication between families and educators can enrich mutual understanding of children's unique needs and home contexts, helping to integrate local knowledge and language and ensuring support and learning opportunities are relevant and responsive.<sup>26</sup> This also builds parents'/caregivers' confidence in supporting learning and development at home. Families involved directly with ECD centers have opportunities to learn from one another, build social networks, and ultimately deepen community trust.<sup>27</sup>

23 World Health Organization, UNICEF, and World Bank, *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development: A Framework for Helping Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential* (World Health Organization, 2018).

24 Figure 1 from Emily M. Morris and Laura Nóra, *Six Global Lessons on How Family, School, and Community Engagement Can Transform Education* (Brookings Institution, 2024). Based on Joyce L. Epstein et al., *School, Family, and Community Partnerships* (Corwin, 2018).

25 Franziska Cohen and Yvonne Anders, "Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education and Care and its Effects on the Social-Emotional and Language Skills of 3-Year-Old Children," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 31, no. 1 (2020): 125-142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2019.1646293>; Milagros Nores et al., "The Cost of Not Investing in the Next 1000 Days: Implications for Policy and Practice," *The Lancet* 404, no. 10467 (2024): 2117-30, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(24\)01390-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(24)01390-4).

26 Ailsa S. Connelly et al., "We grow together: Parent Participation in an Early Childhood Care and Education Centre," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v14i1.1611>.

27 Annette Lareau, "Social Class Differences in Family-School Relationships: The Importance of Cultural Capital," *Sociology of Education* 60, no. 2 (1987): 73-85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2112583>.

## FSCE IN SOUTH AFRICA'S EXISTING ECD FRAMEWORKS

Although there is no comprehensive definition of FSCE in South Africa's ECD policy frameworks for the sector, families are given some mention in ECD laws, policies, plans, and programs. This report presents an analysis of the different roles and responsibilities assigned to families in education frameworks. The analysis sheds light on how education leaders and decision makers envision family, school, and community engagement in the ECD system in South Africa (see Box 2 for roles and responsibilities). A summary is provided in this section, and an in-depth analysis of each education framework can be found in Appendix A.

### BOX 2

## Envisioned roles and responsibilities of families in education systems

1. **Implementation of policies and practices:** Utilizes families to implement education policies and frameworks, and/or to promote decentralization of education systems. This includes enlisting families in supporting learning at home, enhancing families' communication with teachers and school leaders, and encouraging active participation and volunteerism in school events and activities.
2. **Decision making and leadership:** Involves families in school decisions and governance bodies through various committees, associations, and boards, and/or in accountability and advocacy efforts.
3. **Being informed:** Ensures families and communities are aware of key education policies, practices, responsibilities, and rights, such as the right of all children to a quality education and healthy nutrition at home.
4. **Providing resources:** Designates parents/caregivers as contributors of financial and in-kind materials and services to schools. This includes any financial or in-kind contributions to teaching, learning, infrastructure, supplies and equipment, management, and other critical areas.
5. **Shifting mindsets:** Mobilizes families, schools, and communities to work together to promote inclusion and reduce stigma and norms prohibiting marginalized children and families from participating in schools. Shifting mindsets also includes intentional efforts to promote positive attitudes and beliefs about family, school, and community partnerships.

Across the seven education frameworks, families are recognized as critical actors in supporting their children's early learning and development. The guiding policy of the ECD sector is the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2015), which recognizes the "collective responsibility for realization of the national integrated early childhood development vision, goals and objectives by all role players, including parents, non-government service providers (for-profit and nonprofit), government departments at all levels, the executive and the legislature."<sup>28</sup>

The roles and responsibilities assigned to families vary by framework, as presented in Table 3. Implementing policies and practices, which focuses on caregiving and supporting learning at home, is the most substantive role and responsibility assigned to families and appears in four out of the seven frameworks. Caregiving refers to positive parenting, or providing nutritious food, safety, and love, and ensuring a nurturing home environment. Supporting learning at home includes "early learning and stimulation for physical, psychological, emotional, social and cog-

<sup>28</sup> Department of Social Development, 2012, 84.

nitive development.”<sup>29</sup> However, there are limited descriptions of what supporting learning at home looks like in practice. Although the frameworks recognize the need for partnerships to support ECD programs, no school-facing roles and responsibilities are assigned to families—such as volunteering or communicating with educators.

TABLE 3

### Roles and responsibilities assigned to families in ECD in education frameworks

Education frameworks	Roles and responsibilities of families
<b>Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act (2024):</b> amends the South African Schools Act to make Grade R compulsory.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision making and leadership</li> </ul>
<b>National Integrated Early Childhood Policy (2015):</b> governing framework for South Africa’s ECD sector covering goals, strategies, and programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementing policies and practices (<i>caregiving, supporting learning at home</i>)</li> <li>• Being informed</li> <li>• Shifting mindsets</li> </ul>
<b>South Africa’s 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programs (2023):</b> is the implementation plan to operationalize the <i>National Integrated Early Childhood Policy</i> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementing policies and practices (<i>caregiving, supporting learning at home</i>)</li> <li>• Being informed</li> </ul>
<b>National Development Plan 2030: Our Future-Make it Work (2012):</b> long-term strategic plan to promote economic development, reduce inequality and poverty by 2030 in South Africa; includes a vision for early childhood and basic education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementing policies and practices (<i>caregiving, supporting learning at home</i>)</li> <li>• Being informed</li> </ul>
<b>Action Plan to 2029: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030 (2025):</b> is the implementation plan for the education sector established in the <i>National Development Plan</i> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision making and leadership</li> <li>• Being informed</li> </ul>
<b>Revised White Paper on Families in South Africa (2021):</b> proposes a policy approach to support and promote families’ well-being, capabilities, and access to resources and support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementing policies and practices (<i>caregiving, supporting learning at home</i>)</li> <li>• Being informed</li> </ul>
<b>Rights and Responsibilities of Parents, Learners, and Public Schools (2006):</b> communicates the roles and responsibilities of families in their children’s education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision making and leadership</li> <li>• Being informed</li> <li>• Providing resources</li> </ul>

<sup>29</sup> Department of Social Development, 2012, 74.

Six out of the seven frameworks underscore the importance of families being informed of their child's rights to education,<sup>30</sup> available resources, support networks such as parenting programs,<sup>31</sup> as well as practices to support a child's early learning and development at home, including the importance of play.<sup>32</sup> Shifting mindsets, which encompass efforts to promote positive beliefs and practices regarding families' involvement, surfaced in the National Integrated ECD Policy (2015). The policy highlighted the need to use public communications campaigns to mobilize and shift mindsets within communities to recognize the importance of early learning and its benefits in promoting academic, cognitive, and social development; lifelong health and employment outcomes; and the role of parents/caregivers as primary educators.<sup>33</sup>

National frameworks offer no clear opportunities or mechanisms that involve families in decision making and leadership roles within ECD centers and other ELP settings. However, beyond ECD centers, three frameworks highlight families' roles and responsibilities in decision making and leadership for Grade R families in formal schooling through school governing bodies (SGBs). SGBs manage school finances, develop school policies related to admission, code of conduct, language of instruction, and encourage family engagement through events and volunteering activities.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the Action Plan to 2029: Towards Realization of Schooling 2030 (2025) aims to promote "two-way accountability between parents and the school,"<sup>35</sup> where schools communicate children's learning progress clearly to families, and families demonstrate their commitment to supporting learning at home. However, there are no clear mechanisms to support this role.

Education frameworks offer limited guidance on the expectations of families in providing resources. Resources include volunteering or financial donations. Families' roles in fundraising are mentioned in the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents, Learners, and Public Schools (2006).<sup>36</sup> Raising funds and donations to cover school expenses and budget shortfalls is often considered a form of family engagement as it supports the learning environment, but paying school fees is not typically considered a form of involvement.

In addition to families' roles in *implementing policies and practices*, community members are given roles and responsibilities in ECD centers in the National Development Plan 2030: Our Future-Make it Work (2012). Community members, who are not clearly defined in the plan, may refer to other parents/caregivers in the community, civil society and religious leaders, and beyond. Their roles include "helping to deliver the school nutrition program, growing and supplying the school with vegetables and preparing meals, monitoring learner safety, and preventing vandalism and theft."<sup>37</sup>

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30 DBE, *Rights and Responsibilities of Parents, Learners, and Public Schools* (RSA, 2006).

31 Department of Social Development, *Revised White Paper on Families in South Africa* (RSA, 2021).

32 Department of Social Development, 2012.

33 Department of Social Development, 2012.

34 "What Does an SGB Do?" DBE, RSA, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.education.gov.za/Informationfor/ParentsandGuardians/SGBs/SGB3.aspx>.

35 DBE, *Action Plan to 2029: Towards Realization of Schooling 2030* (RSA, 2025), 8.

36 DBE, 2006.

37 National Planning Commission, *National Development Plan 2030: Our Future-Make it Work* (RSA, 2012), 311.

# Research design

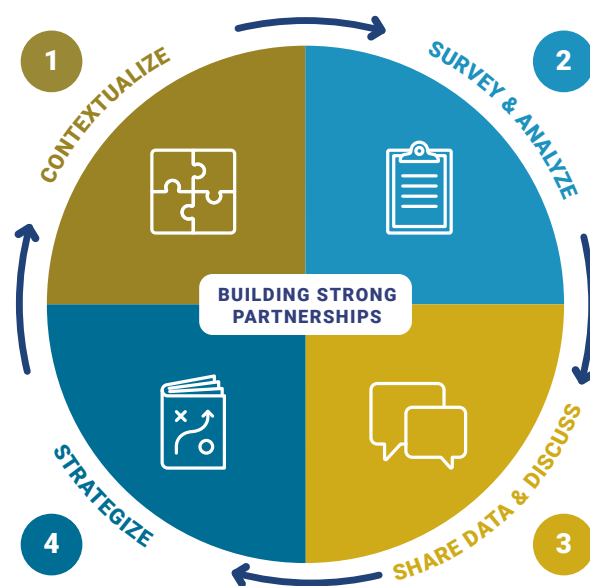
## CONVERSATION STARTER TOOLS METHODOLOGY<sup>38</sup>

The findings and recommendations in this policy brief draw on the document analysis presented above as well as data collected through the Conversation Starter Tools research methodology. The goal of this community-driven research is to guide schools, districts, and civil society organizations in examining the landscape of family, school, and community engagement in their contexts and to develop a shared vision of how to build stronger family, school, and community partnerships. The process is not intended to judge or assess schools or districts but rather to facilitate greater relational trust between families, educators, and students.

The Conversation Starter Tools were developed by the Family, School, and Community Engagement in Education initiative at CUE in collaboration with school and civil society organization teams around the world, including Mikhulu in South Africa. This approach guides school teams through the process of collecting survey **data** with families, educators, and students, using data as a springboard for **dialogues**, and ultimately to generate strategies and new **directions** that can be integrated into school practices and policies. As seen in Figure 2,<sup>39</sup> this mixed-methods suite includes surveys, focus group discussion guides, and other protocols to enhance data, dialogue, and directions on how to strengthen collaboration and partnerships between families, schools, and communities.

FIGURE 2

### Conversation Starter Tools process



38 Between 2022 and 2024, the Conversation Starter Tools research teams surveyed 9,473 families, 2,726 educators, and 9,963 students in 235 schools across 16 countries. Hundreds of subsequent dialogues on how strategies for strengthening partnerships were then held across these schools. See Emily M. Morris and Laura Nóra, *Six Global Lessons on How Family, School, and Community Engagement Can Transform Education* (Brookings Institution, 2024).

39 Emily M. Morris et al., *Conversation Starter Tools: A Participatory Research Guide to Building Stronger Family, School, and Community Partnerships* (Brookings Institution, 2024).

## RESEARCH PROCESS

The Conversation Starter Tool research in South Africa was led by Mikhulu in 2023. The surveys gathered viewpoints from 484 parents/caregivers and 74 educators in 10 private ECD centers in the Western Cape district. The response rate for family respondents was 46.6%, meaning that nearly one out of two families invited to participate actually participated, which is fairly high for a first-time survey process. The surveys were administered in Xhosa, which is the language of instruction and spoken by the majority of families (91.1%) and educators (95.5%) in the sample. English was spoken as the primary home-language by 2.5% families and 1.4% of the educators.

Surveys were offered orally to families and educators or through a virtual link that they could complete independently. Survey data was analyzed and presented in easy-to-read and pictorial formats accessible for low-literacy audiences. Mikhulu shared the collected data and subsequent analysis with each of the 10 ECD centers and held focus group conversations with a total of 84 parents/caregivers and 16 educators to discuss the data. These conversations revealed valuable qualitative insights and provided an opportunity for families and educators to listen to each other's ideas and perspectives, engage in dialogue on barriers they face, and ideate responsive strategies and solutions for deepening family-school partnerships.

# Demographics of families and educators

Gender, level of education, and household socioeconomic status (SES) were collected for 484 parents/caregivers and 74 educators. Whether families had a child with a disability (CWD) was also collected. Among the educators, 80% were either teachers, teaching assistants, or ECD center leaders, whereas the remaining 20% were other ELP staff, such as cooks, drivers, and other supporting roles.

## GENDER AND DISABILITY STATUS OF THE CHILD

Across ECD centers in this research, as shown in Table 4, nearly four out of five (78.9%) family respondents were female. In South Africa, mothers, grandmothers, and other female caregivers shoulder most of the caregiving responsibilities, particularly for young children.<sup>40</sup> The majority (93%) of ECD educators in this research were also female. ECD educators and practitioners in South Africa are predominantly female (96%) and often work in informal and under-resourced settings.<sup>41</sup>

Only a small proportion of families (2.7%) reported having a child with a disability. There is limited national data available on the number of CWDs under the age of 6 years.<sup>42</sup> National data indicates that 6.9% of children aged 5 to 9 years were reported as having a disability.<sup>43</sup> While ECD centers can play a crucial role in early identification of children with disabilities, few centers are currently equipped with the resources or skills for conducting the necessary assessments, and therefore identification is likely low and prevalence underreported.<sup>44</sup>

TABLE 4

### Participant demographics by gender and disability status

Participant groups	Number	Percent female	Percent with CWD
Families	484	78.9%	2.7%
Educators	74	93.2%	n/a

40 Michelle Hatch and Dorrit Posel, "Who Cares for Children? A Quantitative Study of Childcare in South Africa," *Development Southern Africa* 35, no. 2 (2018): 267–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2018.1452716>.

41 Kaylianne Aploon-Zokufa, "Forgotten Women in Education: A Narrative Inquiry into the Marginalisation of ECD Practitioners," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1492, [https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-sajce\\_v14\\_n1\\_a1492](https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-sajce_v14_n1_a1492); Suzette Cora Ragadu and Sebastiaan Rothmann, "Decent Work, Capabilities and Flourishing at Work," *Mental Health and Social Inclusion* 27, no. 4 (2023): 317–39, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MHSI-05-2023-0054>.

42 Amani Karisa et al., "Priorities for Access to Early Childhood Development Services for Children with Disabilities in South Africa," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 12, no. 1 (2022): 1119, [https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-sajce\\_v12\\_i1\\_a1119](https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-sajce_v12_i1_a1119).

43 Statistics South Africa, *Profiling the Socio-Economic Status and Living Arrangements of Persons with Disabilities in South Africa*, 2011–2022 (RSA, 2024b).

44 Department of Social Development, *Audit of Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centers: National Report* (RSA, 2014).

## LEVEL OF EDUCATION AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

As shown in Table 5, roughly one-third of parents/caregivers (34%) completed primary education or less, and more than one-third (40%) completed secondary education. Only one-quarter (27.7%) completed post-secondary education. This is consistent with national data, which shows that 48% of adults have completed secondary education.<sup>45</sup> Educators in ECD centers had similar levels of education to families, but a higher proportion had some post-secondary education. National data reveals that the majority of the ECD workforce (78%) lack appropriate qualifications, namely the National Qualification Framework Levels 4 and 5.<sup>46</sup>

TABLE 5

### Parents/caregivers' and educators' level of education and SES

Participant groups	Level of education			Percent meeting basic needs (SES)	
	Primary school or less	Secondary	Post-secondary	Never or sometimes	Mostly or always
Families (n =484)	34.0%	38.3%	27.7%	47.8%	52.2%
Educators (n =59)	39.0%	16.9%	44.1%	52.6%	47.4%
Other staff (n =15)	66.7%	20.0%	13.3%	53.3%	46.7%

Families and educators were also asked their SES status, or “Are you able to cover basic food and living expenses?” The responses were based on a four-point Likert scale where “never” and “sometimes,” “mostly,” and “always.” A little less than half (47.8%) of families and a little more than half of educators and staff (52.8%) reported never or sometimes meeting basic needs, which indicates that families and educators are coming from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Since educators and families likely live in the same communities, and neighborhoods in the Western Cape are highly segregated by SES, this is not surprising. National data shows that 33% of South Africa’s population is living in poverty.<sup>47</sup>

45 Statistics South Africa, *General Household Survey 2024* (RSA, 2024a).

46 DBE, *ECD Census 2021* (RSA, 2021).

47 Poverty rate is defined as the percentage of the population living in poverty at USD 3.15 per day (2021 PPP). “South Africa: Country Profile,” World Bank Poverty & Inequality Platform, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://pip.worldbank.org/country-profiles/ZAF>.

# Findings and recommendations

There are three key findings and recommendations presented in this section. The findings and recommendations offer the DBE as well as ELP providers various strategies and approaches to strengthen partnerships between families and ECD centers. These recommendations are targeted at ECD centers that provide early learning and care for children aged 3 to 5 years.

## **Finding 1: South Africa has a clear definition and framework to guide family, school, and community partnerships in primary and secondary levels but not yet in ECD.**

South Africa does have existing FSCE frameworks—the School-Parent-Community Engagement Framework and Parent and Family Engagement: An Implementation Guide for School Communities—but these cover only primary and secondary schools and do not capture the unique needs of young children.<sup>48</sup> A parallel framework and family guide for ECD is needed to ensure that providers have clear roles and responsibilities for supporting all the different types of family, school, and community engagement. Guidance and strategies for ECD that focus on engaging families of children of different ages and developmental needs are critical, especially given that so few ECD providers have formal training in child development and education. Guidance for families will help them better understand their role in supporting learning. As one parent/caregiver notes, “I am not educated so I will feel small if I teach my children something wrong, it will show low self-esteem from my side as a parent.” Families need to know that regardless of their education levels, they are vital to their children’s learning and development.

As noted in the policy analysis, in South Africa’s ECD policies and plans, roles of parents/caregivers are limited to caregiving and supporting learning at home and do not include the many types of engagement that occur in ECD centers. Furthermore, policies and plans often define partnerships as those “between parents and Government, and between Government and non-government service providers,”<sup>49</sup> rather than partnerships across an ecosystem of actors that support all young children. Without a common definition of family, school, and community engagement, and guidance for ELP providers—as this research showed—practices varied from center to center and were often limited to single events and fundraising as opposed to partnerships that supported children’s learning and well-being.

During the research, parents/caregivers and educators were asked to name the ways in which families were involved in their children’s learning and ECD centers, as noted in Table 6. Parents/caregivers and educators gave similar patterns of responses, citing communicating with teachers and school staff and supporting or monitoring learning at home as the top types of family engagement, followed by attending school events and following school news.

48 National Education Collaboration Trust. *Practical Guidelines: How Parents can Contribute Meaningfully to the Success of their Children in Schools* (National Education Collaboration Trust, 2016a); National Education Collaboration Trust. *School-Parent-Community Engagement Framework* (National Education Collaboration Trust, 2016b).

49 DBE, 2023, 85.

TABLE 6

### Types of involvement and engagement reported by families and educators

Type of family involvement and engagement	Families (n = 484)	Educators (n = 74)
<b>Caregiving and supporting learning at home</b>		
Supporting or monitoring learning	83.5%	77.0%
<b>Communicating</b>		
Communicating with teachers and school staff	88.0%	81.1%
Following school news	72.5%	66.2%
<b>Building Community</b>		
Attending school events	60.3%	75.7%
<b>Volunteering time and resources</b>		
Donations (financial contributions)	58.1%	62.2%
Volunteering in school activities	23.1%	44.6%
<b>Decision making and leadership</b>		
Providing feedback on school decisions	29.3%	41.9%
Leadership role in a parent association	3.1%	16.2%
<b>Not involved</b>		
Not involved	1.7%	0.0%

**NOTE:** The top 2 responses are bolded for each participant group. Responses were “select all” and do not equal 100%.

Although communicating with schools was the main type of family involvement and engagement across ECD centers, the form and frequency of communication varied. Communication was often mediated by the leader or owner of the ECD center, as opposed to direct communication between families and their children’s teachers. As a teacher noted, “Everything starts with the principal, and parents can only communicate with the principal in accordance with the school’s policies. They can’t go directly to the teacher.”

The most common channels of communication were phone calls, social media (WhatsApp), emails, letters, and in-person meetings during child pick-up and drop-off. Educators and families alike noted that access to technology remained a problem for many families, as many parents/caregivers do not have smartphones and sometimes run out of airtime, preventing them from receiving messages. At least one educator, identifying the lack of computers and photocopying capabilities as a communication challenge, noted, “It is difficult to write 50 letters for parents, and it costs money to print outside.”

Much of the communication between families and ECD centers was regarding payments, and to a lesser extent about supporting learning at home, a lost opportunity for focusing on children’s learning and development and connecting parents/caregivers with their children’s teachers. As a parent/caregiver noted, “We don’t communicate and get involved in school matters. We only hear from the school when we are being asked for money.” Focusing communication on payments compromises relationships and makes it difficult for families who fall behind on payments to communicate about their child’s needs. As a parent/caregiver noted, “Unemployment has made it uncomfortable for us as parents to meet with the teachers face-to-face because we haven’t been able to pay school fees.” Families and educators alike noted that a common type of engagement was financial donations to

ECD centers, a form of volunteering time and resources. However, it is unclear what proportion of families were involved in fundraising campaigns and activities, as donations are often intertwined with payments of fees, which are not considered family engagement.

Across ECD centers, families and educators agreed that strong family, school, and community partnerships were essential for young children. Even though families were involved in their children's learning in different ways, they quickly came to a common definition of what family engagement meant in their conversations. As one parent/caregiver shared, "It means coming together with the school for the purpose of developing our children, keeping them safe and secure all the time." Families and educators in this research believed that close communication and collaboration would help ensure that the needs of all students in their community were identified and met. An educator emphasized that family, school, and community engagement entails working "hand-in-hand with families" and "identifying issues early on so that we can address any issues our children encounter early on and prevent them from having negative effects later in life."

In summary, family engagement took on many forms, but the most common were caregiving and supporting learning at home. Families and educators in the research saw the benefits of family, school, and community engagement, yet there was no clear definition, framework, or guidance for building partnerships. As a consequence, ECD centers were missing an opportunity to meaningfully engage with families regarding children's learning, development, and well-being.

**Recommendation 1: Expand the definition and framework for family, school, and community partnerships in primary and secondary education to include ECD. Ensure that ECD policies and plans include comprehensive approaches to family partnerships.**

Families' roles in caregiving and supporting learning at home are important for children's healthy development, learning, and well-being; however, other forms of engagement, such as communicating with teachers, decision making and leadership in centers, and building community, are also vital for children's achievement and success. There is a need for a national ECD framework for family, school, and community engagement that encompasses all the different types of involvement and engagement and builds on the earlier primary and secondary school School-Family-Community Engagement Framework. In this framework, there should be a comprehensive definition of family, school, and community partnerships that can be integrated into national ECD policies and plans.

The ECD framework should include clear roles and responsibilities for all actors, including families, ECD teachers, ELP directors, and community organizations, and guidance on how to build evidence-informed strategies into practice in diverse settings and among different kinds of ELP providers in rural and urban communities. Strategies for how to be inclusive of children with disabilities should be integrated into this framework, as well as guidance for children from other marginalized communities.

Accompanying guidance for families is critical to ensuring that parents/caregivers have a shared vision of family, school, and community engagement as well as strategies on how to partner with schools. Adapting the Parent and Family Engagement: An Implementation Guide for School Communities for ECD families will help ensure that civil society organizations, government institutions, and other partners who provide training to ECD teachers have resources to guide professional development activities. This framework and guidance should be developed in collaboration with families and educators from diverse communities and ECD centers to ensure it is responsive to a wide audience.

In summary, a national definition of FSCE, alongside clear roles and responsibilities for families and educators, and evidence-based strategies and guidance for ECD centers, will ensure that ECD centers and ELP providers build family, school, and community engagement into practice. The DBE should use the frameworks for primary and secondary schools alongside existing research to develop a clear and comprehensive definition of family engagement to be integrated across policies and plans in the ECD sector.

**Finding 2: Play-based learning is central in the ECD approach to early instruction and integral to national curricula and frameworks, but families and educators are unclear about how play-based learning supports the development of children’s foundational academic skills.**

National ECD policies and plans highlight play-based learning as critical to achieving holistic learning goals for young children, and developing cognitive, language, social and emotional, and physical skills.<sup>50</sup> The importance and benefits of play are noted in the three guiding documents on ELP provision, the National Integrated ECD Policy, South Africa’s 2030 Strategy for ECD Programs, as well as the South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four.<sup>51</sup> The frameworks highlight families’ critical roles in supporting, facilitating, and advocating for play-based learning at home and at ECD centers. Most notably, the National Integrated ECD Policy notes the need for “understanding of parents and caregivers, among others, of the importance of play in infants and young children’s early learning and development.”<sup>52</sup> Few families and educators in this research understood how play-based learning supported their children’s learning and development.

In the survey, families were asked to choose a school where they would like their children to learn based on the teaching and learning approaches used. Educators were asked to choose a school where they would like to teach. They were given six different teaching and learning approaches: teacher-centered, student-centered, experiential learning, technology-based, and play-based learning, as well as funds of knowledge, or drawing on home cultures. (Survey questions and response options are in Appendix B).

Nearly one-third of families (36.8%) prioritized teacher-centered pedagogy, as compared to only one in 10 (12.6%) who chose play-based learning, as shown in Figure 3. In conversations, families reiterated that they deferred to teachers, who know best as educators, and hence chose teacher-centered pedagogy. As a parent/caregiver noted, “Give the teachers the reins because they are knowledgeable and have experience instructing children.”

There was confusion about what play-based learning was, and why it supported early learning and development. As one educator noted in a conversation, “I think parents are slightly confused about why kids learn through play.” As a parent/caregiver reiterated, “I don’t know what the child is learning or how to interpret what they are playing.” Families were concerned that if children were playing, they were not learning early math and literacy skills.

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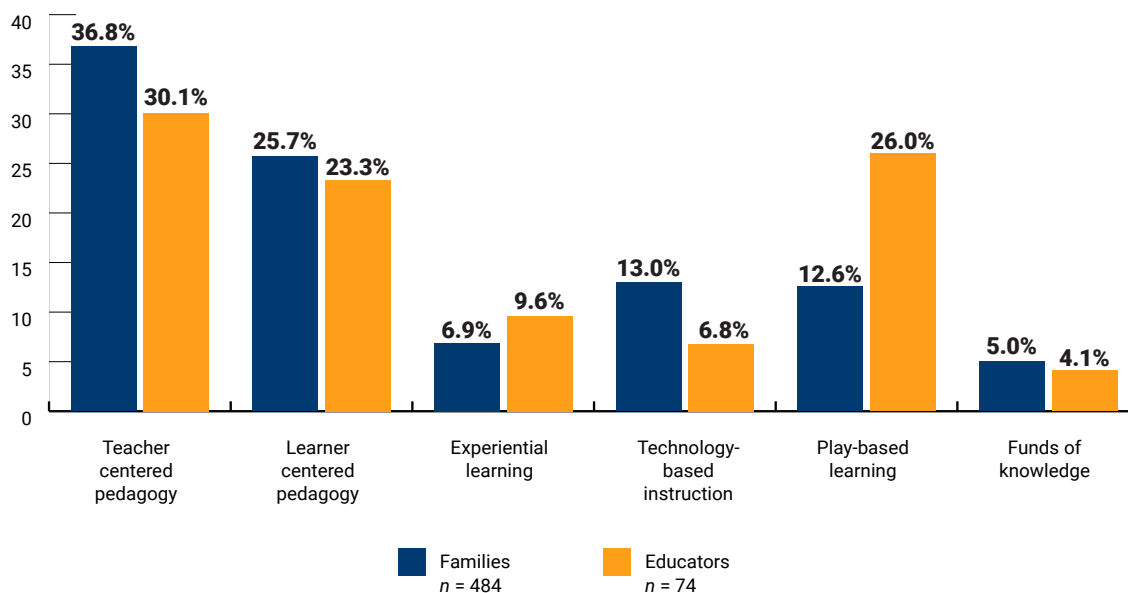
50 Department of Social Development, 2012; DBE, 2023.

51 Department of Social Development, 2012; DBE, *The South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four* (RSA, 2015); DBE, 2023.

52 Department of Social Development, 2012, 27.

**FIGURE 3**

**Beliefs on preferred teaching and learning approaches reported by participant groups**



**NOTE:** Responses were “select all” and do not equal 100%.

Educators also echoed parents’/caregivers’ lack of understanding of play-based learning, one in three also preferred teacher-centered pedagogy (30.1%). A modestly higher proportion of educators preferred play-based pedagogy (26.0%) than families (12.6%). However, educators’ beliefs varied by their level of education. Although the sample was modest, educators with post-secondary education prioritized play-based pedagogy at significantly higher rates (40.7% of n = 28) than those with secondary level education (17.4% of n = 46).<sup>53</sup> This may indicate that with greater education, ECD educators come to understand the benefits of play in a child’s learning and development. As one educator noted, children “learn through playing, movement, and exploration. They learn better when they have fun. Kids like to experience everything; by doing that, they are learning, and when they play ... they develop gross motor skills, fine motor skills, and emotional connection.”

In addition to weighing in on pedagogical approaches, families were asked what they saw as the role of education in society, or their belief on the purpose of school, as shown in Table 7. Families saw the main purpose of school as academic learning, with ECD as building the foundational academic skills critical to further education, followed by social and emotional learning, or understanding oneself and developing social skills and values. One parent/caregiver described why they did not choose social and emotional learning as the top purpose, “I feel that while we send our children to school to become educated, it is our responsibility as parents to teach our kids various social skills and values at home and the teachers’ job to do the academics.” Families saw academic success as a means to acquiring a “good future,” higher education qualifications, gainful employment, and social mobility.

<sup>53</sup> Significance level of 0.95.

TABLE 7

### Beliefs on the purpose of education reported by participant groups

Participant groups	Academic	Economic	Civic	Social & emotional
Families ( <i>n</i> = 484)	51.0%	14.8%	4.6%	29.6%
Educators ( <i>n</i> = 74)	42.5%	19.2%	6.8%	31.5%

**NOTE:** The top response is bold for each participant group. Responses were “select 1” and equal 100%/

Educators, on the other hand, saw the purpose of school as broader than just academic learning. One educator noted, “The school is not just concerned with advancing the students’ academic standing. We don’t concentrate only on reading and writing and promoting academic skills. We teach life skills as well.” Beliefs on the purpose of school alongside pedagogical approaches suggest that families are thinking about academic preparation, and do not fully understand how social and emotional learning and play help build skills critical to the holistic development of a child. Conversations indicated that there have been few contextually and culturally responsive efforts to help educators and families alike understand play and its role in building social and emotional development as well as academic skills.

In summary, despite the national policies and plans’ focus on holistic development through play-based learning, families prioritized academic learning through teacher-centered pedagogies, believing this would lead to higher educational qualifications, gainful employment, and social mobility. Families also shared their lack of understanding of the benefits of play-based learning and preferred that teachers take the lead. Educators’ beliefs varied by their education levels—educators with post-secondary education were most likely to prioritize play-based learning.

**Recommendation 2: Create opportunities for families and educators to experience and discuss how play-based learning supports academic growth, as well as social and emotional development, and receive the tools to facilitate learning at home and at ECD centers in ways that complement one another.**

Families want their children to succeed and grow, but they need more opportunities to understand the importance of play in their children’s development and the ways parents/caregivers can support their children’s social and emotional growth as well as academic skills. ECD centers play an important role in ensuring that children develop holistic skills and have the wrap-around support they need to thrive. Even with limited training, ECD educators are critical partners to families. Families and educators alike need opportunities to participate in play-based learning together to understand that it is not an alternative to learning early math and literacy skills; it is a medium for developing these foundational skills alongside other critical cognitive, physical, and social and emotional milestones.

Opportunities to explore and experience play can be offered through different formats, including radio, television, or in-person workshops. Radio and television programs have been proven to be a cost-effective strategy to provide families, particularly those living in rural or remote regions, with the knowledge and skills to support early learning and development at home.<sup>54</sup> Radio programs include those directed at parents/caregivers as well as those that families can listen to along with their children. Interactive radio programs can support family engagement as they provide parents/caregivers with suggested activities and conversations they can do with their children, to improve family-child connections and develop critical skills.<sup>55</sup> Educational programs such as “Ubongo

<sup>54</sup> Andrea Bosch et al., “Interactive Radio Instruction: An Update from the Field,” in *Technologies for Education: Potentials, Parameters, and Prospects*, ed. Wadi D. Haddad and Alexandra Draxler (UNESCO, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> Amanda Cardarelli et al., *Listen to This! Children’s Podcasts, Family Engagement, and Opportunities for Learning* (Education Development Center, 2025).

Kids,” “Sesame Street,” and other programs also help promote the importance of play in skills development.<sup>56</sup> Such programs not only support language acquisition and foundational learning (literacy and numeracy) but have also increased family involvement in early learning activities at home.<sup>57</sup>

ECD centers can host in-person workshops for families and educators to learn about and experience play. ECD centers could draw on existing open-access resources for ideas and activities to model for families and educators and share suggestions for families to replicate activities at home. For example, centers can model activities suggested in the South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four and discuss the purpose and benefits to children’s learning and development with families and educators. Other resources such as the Parent/Primary Caregiver Capacity Building Training Package, can also be used to facilitate workshops for both families and educators.<sup>58</sup> This training manual has also been developed for a low-literacy audience, which can ensure that ECD educators and families can access the materials, regardless of their education levels. Centers can also source stories, songs, and activities that have been used by families and communities.

ECD centers can collaborate with nonprofits, such as Mikhulu that offer programs to support families’ and educators’ capacities in facilitating play-based learning activities. Mikhulu’s dialogic book-sharing activity, where parents and caregivers learn how to use wordless picture books to have engaging interactions with their children, is an example of a play-based learning strategy that benefits both children and their families. Picture books, which can be interpreted in myriad ways, allow children and caregivers to construct stories in different ways and can stimulate rich conversations. This improves communication and language acquisition skills in young children and improves child-caregiver relationships.<sup>59</sup> Such activities can foster opportunities for intergenerational learning and connection.<sup>60</sup>

In summary, ongoing opportunities for exploring play-based learning can encourage both families and educators to experience various activities and strategies that they can incorporate into their centers and homes, as well as discuss its relevance and importance in promoting holistic learning, well-being, and development. Families also need opportunities to ask questions of educators and unpack their beliefs on education. Such opportunities for families and educators to listen to each other and experience play can ensure that they are working together to support the diverse needs of children.

**Finding 3: Families and educators reported strong mutual trust. For families and educators, this trust was often passive, where their beliefs on the roles and responsibilities in a child’s learning and development were compartmentalized rather than collaborative.**

Families and educators were asked about their level of trust in each other. Using a 4-point Likert scale, low to high, families and educators reported high levels of mutual trust. Trust levels in South Africa were higher than in other countries that looked at trust in primary and secondary schools as shown in Figure 4. Yet, according to the conversations, this trust was often passive, meaning that parents/caregivers saw educators as the experts, and their role as families was to follow their lead. One parent/caregiver shared, “Teachers are trained to look after the kids. I trust them because they are trained for this and can pick up when something is wrong with the child.”

56 Juan-Pablo Giraldo et al., “The Case for Edutainment: Rethinking How We Can Enable Multiple Pathways to Learning for All Children,” UNICEF, June 9, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/blog/edutainment-multiple-pathways-learning>.

57 Mark Wahome, “Ubongo’s Decade of Impact: Transforming Lives Through the Magic of Edutainment,” *Childhood Education* 100 no.3 (2024): 12–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2024.2349501>.

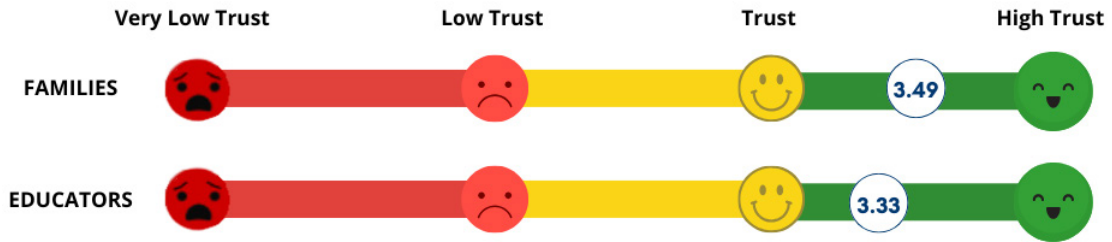
58 Department of Social Development, *Parent/Primary Caregiver Capacity Building Training Package* (RSA, 2008).

59 Zahir Vally et al., “The Impact of Dialogic Book-Sharing Training on Infant Language and Attention: A Randomized Controlled Trial in a Deprived South African Community,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 56, no. 8 (2015): 865-873, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12352>.

60 Irv Katz and Hailey M. Gibbs, “Playful Learning Creates Multigenerational Opportunities with Intergenerational Impacts,” *Education Plus Development* (blog), Brookings Institution, January 30, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/playful-learning-creates-multigenerational-opportunities-with-intergenerational-impacts/>.

FIGURE 4

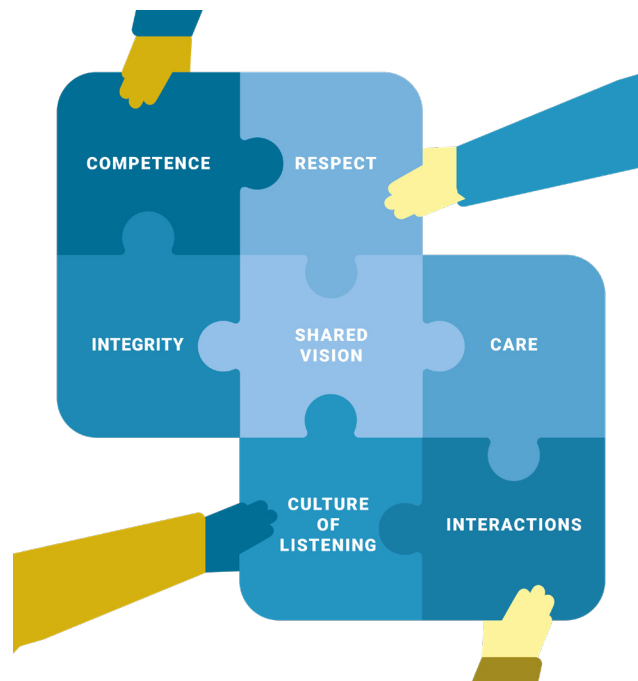
### Relational trust across participant groups



Relational trust is the care, respect, and regard shown for one another.<sup>61</sup> Using CUE’s trust scale, trust was measured according to seven elements as shown in Figure 5.<sup>62</sup> Shared vision is the coherence of beliefs and values about how to best serve all children in the school community. Two-way interactions and a culture of listening and valuing diverse opinions build a sense of belonging. Respect and care indicate dignity, regard, and concern for one another. Competence refers to the acknowledgment of both families’ and educators’ capabilities and skills in supporting children’s learning, development, and well-being. Finally, integrity relates to following through on commitments or promises made.

FIGURE 5

### Elements of relational trust



61 Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).  
62 Figure 5 from Emily M. Morris and Laura Nóra, *Six Global Lessons on How Family, School, and Community Engagement Can Transform Education* (Brookings Institution, 2024).

High trust benefits students, families, and educators by fostering deeper interactions and communication and ensuring that all voices are heard and considered.<sup>63</sup> When families experience high relational trust, they are more likely to be active partners in their children's learning and support school activities, as they tend to feel welcomed and included in schools.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, educators who feel like trusted and valued members of the school community are more motivated and engaged.<sup>65</sup> When both families and educators are actively partnering with one another, students reap the benefits of an inclusive school culture and relevant learning and support.<sup>66</sup>

Educators also noted that being unable to communicate directly with families affected their ability to do their jobs well. As one described, "More often than not, we as teachers are kept in the dark about things. It then makes us seem ignorant to others [families], which decreases the level of trust even more." ECD leaders need to consider the various barriers and challenges that families and educators face in receiving information and communicating, and create mechanisms that include word-of-mouth, written notices, and one-on-one meetings that reach all families.

Although trust was high in South Africa, some families reported that insufficient opportunities for two-way communication with teachers led to a breakdown of trust. Educators also reported high trust, but noted several times during conversations that families were not always engaged in their children's learning, often prioritizing other commitments. As one educator noted, "When it comes to school-related activities and meetings, parents are not involved, visible, or engaged." Seeing families as not interested can lead to a blame game, where educators assume families' absence as a lack of interest, which may further discourage them from collaborating. As one parent/caregiver noted, "When it comes to parent-teacher meetings, the staff never asks us to attend; instead, they assume that we won't be available." However, as many families noted during the conversation, there are often structural and situational barriers, such as a lack of access to technology and a lack of time due to inflexible work arrangements, that prevent them from being involved.

The conversations highlighted a need for more interactions and two-way communication between families and educators about children's learning and development. As noted under Finding 1, communication often goes through the ECD center owner and focuses on payment of fees as opposed to direct communication between parents/caregivers and educators about children's learning and development. As a parent/caregiver noted, "We need to be able to correspond with everyone in the school ... It can be challenging to communicate with the school head. As parents, you might want to clarify the situation from time to time with the teacher and we can't do this." Two-way communication centered on the child is critical for meaningful family engagement.

Another element in the trust scale was developing a shared vision, which includes beliefs on educational approaches to teaching and learning, and ensuring that families and educators are on the same page. Building this shared vision is a challenge given the high turnover of ECD educators; poor working conditions and low pay result in high educator attrition.<sup>67</sup> One parent/caregiver shared, "We find it challenging to trust the teachers and feel at ease with the staff because of staff reorganizations and the hiring of inexperienced and underqualified teachers." Building trust requires consistency in ECD centers and ensuring there are competent educators.

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63 Richaa Hoysala and Emily Morris, "Strengthening Trust in School and Communities," *Education Plus Development* (blog), Brookings Institution, June 9, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/strengthening-trust-in-schools-and-communities/>.

64 Socorro G. Herrera et al., *Equity in School-Parent Partnerships: Cultivating Community and Family Trust in Culturally Diverse Classrooms* (Teachers College Press, 2020).

65 Diah Pranitasari, "The Influence of Effective Leadership and Organizational Trust to Teacher's Work Motivation and Organizational Commitment," *Media Ekonomi dan Manajemen* 35, no. 1 (January 2020): 75–91.

66 Elisabetta Fenizia and Santa Parrello, "School Trust and Sense of Belonging: Restoring Bonds and Promoting Well-Being in Schools," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 22, no. 4 (2025): 498, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22040498>; Steven B. Sheldon and Sol Bee Jung, *The Family Engagement Partnership Student Outcome Evaluation* (Johns Hopkins University, 2015).

67 Genesis Analytics, *Evaluation of the South African Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy Evaluation Report: SA NIECD Policy* (Genesis Analytics, 2023)

In summary, families and educators reported high levels of mutual trust, yet both noted several challenges to meaningful partnerships. Challenges included a lack of consistent interactions, high turnover of ECD staff, and blaming families for not being more involved. A lack of shared vision for children’s learning and development also made it difficult to develop deep partnerships. Facilitating two-way communication around children’s learning was identified as an important first step in building greater trust and partnership. Meaningful two-way communication between families and educators can foster active trust and partnerships critical to children and the work of the center.

**Recommendation 3: Share tools and strategies that ECD centers can use to build meaningful communication and partnerships with families and transform centers into more family-friendly spaces that encourage mutual responsibility.**

Family-friendly ECD centers are welcoming and inclusive to diverse families and their needs. These centers see families, as well as educators, as equal partners and assets, and work collaboratively to support all children’s learning, well-being, and development. The first step to creating family-friendly spaces is to improve mechanisms for information sharing and two-way communication. ECD centers can regularly communicate information to families using one-way communication strategies such as written notices, WhatsApp or other social media, phone calls, and in-person meetings held at times convenient for working parents/caregivers to attend.

Two-way communication ensures that ECD centers understand families’ lived experiences and develop a shared vision that is inclusive of diverse perspectives. ECD centers can establish on-going opportunities to listen to families. For example, centers can host listening circles that invite educators and families to listen to one another and build greater alignment and collaboration.<sup>68</sup> These meetings allow for dialogue on important topics such as curriculum, progress toward learning goals, and other key issues pertinent to both families and educators. Such meetings create space for families and educators to ask questions and co-create strategies that are responsive to the cultures and contexts of the community, as well as the barriers they face. ECD center leaders can also host informal coffee chats and breakfasts, which not only create authentic connections but also engender a sense of community and belonging.<sup>69</sup>

Center leaders can also rely on parent champions, or trusted family leaders in the community, to serve as liaisons between the center and the families and mobilize community members to engage actively in schools.<sup>70</sup> Parent champions can serve as points of contact for families who may feel more comfortable asking questions or raising concerns with another parent/caregiver rather than a center leader. Parent champions can also facilitate affinity groups and communities based on language and culture, as well as for families of children with disabilities. This ensures that families have a community they can rely on and collaborate with regarding specific concerns or needs that may arise.

Family-friendly ECD centers also ensure they have a shared vision of education that is representative of the community’s diverse beliefs and perspectives. Another critical step to creating family-friendly spaces is to invite families to contribute to the centers’ visions and missions, as well as key programs. For example, centers can hold

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68 Emily M. Morris and Rini D’Souza, “Starting Conversations on Social and Emotional Learning with Parents and Teachers is Critical for Building Family Engagement: An Analysis with Schools in Mumbai and Pune,” *Education Plus Development* (blog), Brookings Institution, May 31, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/starting-conversations-on-social-and-emotional-learning-with-parents-and-teachers-is-critical-for-building-family-engagement/>.

69 Susan Auerbach, “Beyond Coffee with the Principal: Toward Leadership for Authentic School–Family Partnerships,” *Journal of School Leadership* 20, no. 6 (2010): 728–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461002000603>.

70 Bernie Carter et al., “Parents Reaching Out to Parents: An Appreciative, Qualitative Evaluation of Stakeholder Experiences of the Parent Champions in the Community Project,” *Children* 9, no. 10 (2022): 1479, <https://doi.org/10.3390/children9101479>; Kath Wilkinson et al., “Understanding Knowledge Mobilisation between Community Champions and Parents: Evidence from a Community-Cased Programme to Support Parents with Young Children,” *Children* 11, no. 8 (2024): 901, <https://doi.org/10.3390/children11080901>.

annual meetings where families are invited to help develop the centers' visions, missions, and policies.<sup>71</sup> Such meetings create opportunities to reflect on and discuss what is working and what can improve and foster shared decision making and accountability between families and educators.

Centers can also facilitate structured listening circles throughout the year that bring together smaller groups of parents/caregivers, educators, and center leaders to explore what children need most in their early years, what educators and families can do to support that, and what barriers make active participation difficult. Through guided conversations, families and educators can co-create two or three practices to embed in daily routines. This collaborative approach can ensure that the center's environment is rooted in mutual learning and approaches are directly responsive to the lived experiences of the families they serve.

Building on these approaches, Mikhulu has documented several practices that small ECD centers utilize to cultivate family-friendly environments. These strategies emphasize consistent communication and trust-building through daily touchpoints such as WhatsApp updates, photos, and quick check-ins, which reassure parents/caregivers and help them feel like part of their child's day. Centers further open their doors through learning exhibitions and family-child play sessions. Forming external partnerships with clinics and libraries to provide holistic support for the entire family system can help address emotional and practical challenges that families face. Such efforts can improve trust among families, educators, and staff at the center and mitigate the erosion of trust caused by high staff turnover.

In summary, ECD centers should create opportunities for one-way and two-way communication between families and educators to discuss important issues related to their children's learning. Inviting and elevating families' and educators' voices facilitates the development of a shared vision and strategies that are responsive to the needs of all children. Through active dialogue, centers can foster relational trust and active partnerships between families and ECD center educators needed to create family-friendly centers.

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71 "Escola Municipal Waldir Garcia," Brookings Institution, Accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/case-study-escola-municipal-waldir-garcia/>.

## Conclusion

The Republic of South Africa has made considerable commitments and investments to strengthen the ECD sector through policy, planning, and implementation. One critical missing piece in this approach is families. While current frameworks acknowledge the importance of families' roles and the home environment, they lack the formal mechanisms and practical guidance necessary to foster deep, collaborative relationships between centers and caregivers.

To create a family-centered ECD education system, it is important that the Department of Basic Education and Early Learning Programs move beyond seeing families merely as passive recipients of services and instead embrace them as essential partners. By expanding the national definition of family engagement to include the early years, the DBE can create a unified vision that bridges the gap between care and learning that happens at home and in ECD centers. In creating this shared vision, it is essential that families and educators have opportunities to understand and discuss approaches to learning and expectations of family participation in early learning. At present, play-based learning is positioned as a foundational approach in policies and curricula, but families and educators are not on the same page about the role of play in early learning. Opportunities for families and educators to understand, experience, and discuss how play contributes to the development of foundational numeracy, literacy, and social-emotional skills are vital. By creating space for caregivers to ask questions and unpack educational beliefs, centers ensure that parents/caregivers and educators work as partners to support each child's holistic growth across both environments.

Finally, creating family-friendly centers requires intentional strategies that move beyond passive trust to mutual responsibility. This includes equipping centers to have meaningful two-way communication where families are heard. By inviting families to help develop a shared vision and contribute to center policies, providers can foster the relational trust and active partnerships necessary to support every child's unique developmental journey. Fostering meaningful family, school, and community engagement will help South Africa reach its vision of universal, equitable, high-quality ECD.

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# Appendix A

An in-depth analysis of ECD policies and programs is presented below.

The **Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act (2024)**<sup>72</sup> was signed into law and updates the South African Schools Act to make Grade R compulsory. In this amendment, families are ascribed the role of *decision making and leadership* through the school governing bodies (SGBs). All primary and secondary public schools are required to form an SGB; however, such a mandate does not exist for private schools and ECD centers. According to the Act, the SGBs can only be chaired by a family representative who is not employed by the public school. It expands the roles of the SGBs to include developing the schools' code of conduct after consultation with students, families, and educators, with specific considerations for the diverse beliefs, religions, and needs of the school community. The SGB is responsible for monitoring student attendance and punctuality. Finally, the SGB must keep records of all school funds and expenditures and provide regular updates to all families.

The **National Integrated Early Childhood Policy 2015** (2015) lays out a multisectoral framework for early childhood development to ensure “comprehensive, universally available and equitable early childhood development services,”<sup>73</sup> across multiple settings, including homes, communities, and ECD centers. The framework outlines eight comprehensive programs with specific goals, objectives, and actionable strategies towards achieving the policy's vision and objectives. These include programs for nutrition, parent support, early learning, play facilities, and national public communications, to name a few.

A key principle of the policy is the “recognition of and respect for parents as primarily responsible for early development.”<sup>74</sup> Across programs, the primary role designated to families is *being informed* of practices to support a child's early learning and development at home, including the importance of play. The policy acknowledges that families may sometimes lack the knowledge, skills, or resources to promote their children's learning and development, and as such recognizes the government's responsibility “to provide support, capacity development, counseling and, where necessary, resources to parents or, in their absence, primary caregivers to strengthen the nurturing parent-/caregiver-child relationship.”<sup>75</sup>

Other roles for families include *implementing policies and practices and shifting mindsets*. There is little mentioned across the framework about how families and educators can work together to support child's learning and development.<sup>76</sup> The framework also recognizes the “collective responsibility for realization of the national integrated early childhood development vision, goals and objectives by all role players, including parents, non-government service providers (for-profit and non-profit), government departments at all levels, the executive and the legislature.”<sup>77</sup> However, there are few details on how families can fulfill this role in practice. The national public communications program within this policy aims to *shift mindsets* of families and the public on the importance of early childhood development. It is unclear how the public communication strategy will be implemented or how families will be engaged in it.

**South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programs** (2023) outlines the strategic plan to implement the vision for early childhood learning and development established in the National Integrated Early

72 RSA, 2024.

73 Department of Social Development, 2012, 8.

74 Department of Social Development, 2012, 51.

75 Department of Social Development, 2012, 51.

76 Department of Social Development, 2012, 84.

77 Department of Social Development, 2012, 84.

Childhood Development Policy (2015). The strategy introduces key programs based on the age of the child, namely parent support programs for families with children aged 0 to 2 years and early learning programs for families with children aged 3 to 5 years. Parent support programs are inter-sectoral and “community-based family support programs to build the capacity of parents and caregivers to support children’s health, development, and learning in the home”<sup>78</sup> through home visits and community outreach. Early learning programs are envisioned to cover all children between the ages of 3 and 5 years, delivered through existing structures of ECD centers, playgroups, and day mothers, with the introduction of mobile ECD programs and toy libraries. There is limited information about how ECD providers will collaborate with families to support learning. In addition, the strategy proposes a public information and communication program to disseminate the importance of ECD and play-based learning to the public.

The strategy recognizes the “central role of parents and caregivers,”<sup>79</sup> and notes community and parental involvement as a critical feature of high-quality early childhood development learning programs. The roles assigned to families are *being informed* and *implementing policies and practices* through caregiving and supporting learning at home.

The framework also outlines the necessary enabling system capacity, including new policy and regulatory reform, funding mechanisms, infrastructure and workforce development, and curriculum and quality assurance. It seeks to collaborate with civil society and training institutions for workforce development. Families and communities are not involved in the other priorities of policy, regulatory, or curricular reform.

The **National Development Plan 2030: Our Future-Make it Work** (2012) is a multisectoral long-term strategic plan to promote economic development, reduce inequality and poverty by 2030. The plan identifies investments in education as critical to achieving this vision, and outlines South Africa’s vision and strategies for early childhood education and basic education. By 2030, the framework envisions universal early childhood development, which is defined as the “comprehensive support for the holistic development of young children and their families,”<sup>80</sup> and encompasses support for family planning, healthy pregnancies, nutrition for mothers and young children, parenting support, quality learning opportunities, and preparation for schooling. Preparation for schooling entails two years of compulsory preschool from the age of 4, with differentiated infrastructure and services for urban and rural areas.

The plan positions families as critical actors at this stage. Their roles include *being informed* about their children’s developmental needs and *implementing policies and practices* by ensuring adequate nutrition and supporting learning at home. Community members also support *implementing policies and practices* by “helping to deliver the school nutrition program, growing and supplying the school with vegetables and preparing meals, monitoring learner safety, and preventing vandalism and theft.”<sup>81</sup> The plan also acknowledges families’ role in *providing resources* as most ECD services are provided by private and community organizations that charge a fee. The plan offers no roles for families in communicating or building partnerships with ECD educators.

Beyond ECD, families’ roles also include taking on *decision making and leadership* roles in School Governing Bodies (SGBs). Schools are required to provide adequate information to families regarding student performance to hold schools accountable. This strategy further promotes one-way communication from schools to families and offers limited opportunities for meaningful engagement, discussions, and negotiation. Roles in *decision making and leadership* are not assigned to families at the ECD level.

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78 DBE, 2023, 15.

79 DBE, 2023, 6.

80 National Planning Commission, 2012, 302. 81 National Planning Commission, 2012, 311.

The **Action Plan to 2029: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030** (2025) is the education sector plan for the years 2025 to 2029. This plan introduces 27 goals to further the vision established in the National Development Plan 2030. Improving family and community participation in school governance is a goal in this plan. Families' roles in this plan include *being informed* of their children's learning progress and participating in *decision making and leadership* through SGBs. The plan promotes "two-way accountability between parents and the school,"<sup>82</sup> where schools communicate children's learning progress clearly to families, and families demonstrate their commitment to supporting learning at home. The plan suggests that when families are aware of their children's progress and school affairs, they are more likely to hold schools accountable for a higher quality of education and support learning at home. The plan offers limited guidance to schools and families on how to operationalize these roles.

The **Revised White Paper on Families in South Africa** (2021)<sup>83</sup> recognizes the integral role that families play, in collaboration with the state, communities, civil society, and the private sector in promoting positive outcomes for all. The white paper proposes a policy approach to support and promote family well-being, capabilities, and access to care for family members. The paper promotes family involvement in ECD centers and schools. It assigns families the role of *being informed* about available resources, support networks such as parenting programs, and access to services for vulnerable families and families with children with disabilities. Another role assigned to families is *implementing policies and practices* by leveraging these resources and services toward caregiving and supporting learning. There are no details on how ECD centers and schools can collaborate with families to promote learning, well-being, and development. The framework recognizes the role of civil society, religious organizations, the private sector, traditional leaders, and academia in supporting, advocating for, and promoting family well-being.

The **Rights and Responsibilities of Parents, Learners, and Public Schools** (2006)<sup>84</sup> is a poster that provides an overview of the roles and responsibilities of families in supporting their children's education, including *being informed* of children's rights to education, participating in *decision making and leadership* roles on SGBs, and *providing resources* such as voluntary contributions. The poster only includes information for Grade R and beyond and does not detail families' roles at other stages of ECD.

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82 DBE, 2025.

83 Department of Social Development, 2021.

84 DBE, 2006.

# Appendix B

TABLE 8

## Survey question and response options on preferred pedagogies in the families' survey

**You are visiting different classrooms to choose the school where you want your child to study/where you want to teach. Which teaching and learning practices are most important in your choice?"**

Response options	Code
Teacher leads all instruction	Teacher-centered pedagogy
Student participation is central to learning	Learner-centered pedagogy
Experiences and projects are central to learning	Experiential learning
Technology is central to learning	Technology-based instruction
Play is central to learning	Play-based learning
Home cultures and languages are central to learning	Funds of knowledge

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