



# LEARNING WHAT MATTERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

A NETWORK-BASED APPROACH TO TRANSFORMING EARLY LEARNING

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to express their sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the completion of this research. We are especially indebted to SmartStart network partners, the Siyakholwa Development Foundation, Project Preparation Trust, Khululeka, the coaches who guided and facilitated SmartStart site visits, as well as the hub staff, franchisors, and franchisees (anonymized) who participated in interviews. Their openness and thoughtful engagement provided invaluable insights into everyday barriers and levers for change. We are also grateful for the SmartStart staff who coordinated logistics for site visits, and for the Policy and Advocacy team for their constructive guidance and intellectual input throughout the research process. Our deep and sincere appreciation goes to Sarah Lytle, non-resident fellow at CUE for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of the paper, and to our editor, Jennifer O'Donoghue, deputy director of CUE, whose thorough review greatly enriched this paper.

Brookings gratefully acknowledges the support provided by the LEGO Foundation. Brookings recognizes that the value it provides is in its commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment.

# ACRONYMS

<b>DBE</b>	Department of Basic Education
<b>ECCE</b>	Early Childhood Care and Education
<b>ECD</b>	Early Childhood Development
<b>ELOM</b>	Early Learning Outcomes Measure
<b>ELPs</b>	Early Learning Programs
<b>LMICs</b>	Low- and Middle-Income Countries
<b>NDP</b>	National Development Plan
<b>NEST</b>	Network for Education Systems Transformation
<b>NIECDP</b>	National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy
<b>NGOs</b>	Non-Government Organizations
<b>NSNP</b>	National School Nutrition Program
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund

# ABOUT SMARTSTART

SmartStart is South Africa's largest network of quality, affordable early learning providers, serving over 160,000 children weekly through a platform model that positions local women as franchisees, delivering early learning in their communities. Working collaboratively in cross-sectoral partnerships, SmartStart establishes early learning programs, strengthens early learning ecosystems, and provides training, licensing, financial and evidence-based program resources that support the delivery of affordable home and community-based early learning opportunities to 3-5 year olds at scale. SmartStart programming operates

through a franchise model linking a central operational hub to decentralized franchisors (NGOs) and franchisees (local women practitioners) through a network of 'clubs'. This model aims to create a country-wide coherence with distributed, proximate problem-solving, powered by local actors' agency in diverse contexts.

SmartStart is a member of the Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST). SmartStart partnered with the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution as part of the NEST South Africa study.



# ABOUT THIS SERIES<sup>1</sup>

How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters?

Education systems worldwide face mounting pressure to prepare children and young people not just for academic success, but for meaningful participation in an increasingly complex world (UNESCO 2023). Growing evidence suggests that to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, children and young people need a broad set of skills, including but not limited to literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, socioemotional learning, and civic engagement (Dweck, Walton, and Cohen 2014; Martinez 2022; Radó 2020).

The Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST), a global impact network<sup>2</sup> co-led by the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution and ten civil society organizations across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia, seeks to understand how education systems can transform

to prioritize a “breadth of skills” – an integrated set of academic, socioemotional, and transversal competencies that enable all children and young people to thrive (Care, Anderson, and Kim 2016; UNESCO n.d.).

Central to our work is a shared exploratory question: How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters? This question acknowledges that, while concepts like “education systems,” “opportunities,” and “what matters” may differ across contexts, what binds the network is our collective commitment to understanding how education systems can transform to prioritize the development of a breadth of skills in all children and young people. Rather than prescribing universal definitions, NEST embraces locally grounded interpretations that honor the historical, cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities of each setting.

1. The introductory section includes common language for the sections “About this Series,” “Framing Our Inquiry,” and “About this Report” across all the reports in the NEST “Learning What Matters” series. The original source is “Learning what matters in Kenya” (Gikandi et al. 2025).
2. Impact networks are complex living systems, made of interacting people, organizations, and ecosystems. In contrast to traditional organizations with linear processes and standard operating procedures, networks are dynamic, interconnected, and variable. For details about the model of impact networks, see Ehrlichman (2021).

# FRAMING OUR INQUIRY: THE 4 Ps AND 3 Cs AS WORKING FRAMEWORKS

Informed by prior research from CUE at the Brookings Institution, NEST draws on two interconnected frameworks that guide our exploration of education systems transformation toward skills development. The 4P framework identifies four high-level domains of change in systems transformation: purpose, pedagogy, positioning, and power (Sengeh and Winthrop 2022; Winthrop, Morris, and Qargha 2023). The 3C framework proposes three catalytic conditions believed to enable and sustain the transformation process: commitment, capacity, and cohesion. (CUE 2022; Olateju et al. forthcoming). In this report, we focused primarily on the 3C framework as the analytical lens for examining South Africa’s early learning ecosystem. The 4P framework, while relevant to the broader NEST inquiry, is not the primary lens applied here.

We approach these frameworks not as prescriptive models, but as working theories that require interrogation, adaptation, and potential expansion based on observations in diverse local contexts. Our methodology is deliberately abductive, that is, moving systematically between observation and theoretical inference while remaining open to alternative explanations and framework modifications. This approach reflects NEST’s commitment to collaborative inquiry that is iterative, values local knowledge and expertise, and contributes to a broader understanding of education systems transformation. We recognize that meaningful change cannot be externally imposed, but must emerge from genuine engagement with local realities, assets, and constraints.



# ABOUT THIS REPORT

The following country-level findings represent an early stage of inquiry in NEST's ongoing exploration of education systems transformation for skills development. Exploratory in nature, the insights emerging from South Africa's unique context are an initial step toward a shared understanding of its education landscape. While findings of this research may not be directly transferable to other settings, we believe that the patterns, tensions, and possibilities identified in this report can inform broader conversations about

how education systems worldwide might better support all children and young people in developing the skills they need to thrive. As NEST continues its collaborative work across ten countries, subsequent studies aim to deepen these insights and further refine our understanding of what enables sustainable education systems transformation toward a breadth of skills. As such, the following report should not be read as a final statement, but as part of an ongoing, iterative process of learning and discovery that contributes to an emerging field.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children aged 0-5 years is increasingly recognized as the foundation for individual development and societal transformation.<sup>3</sup> However, in South Africa, of the approximately 3.5 million children aged 3-5, approximately 1.15 million remain excluded from any form of early learning (Hall et al. 2024; Teacher Demographic Dividend 2024). Despite progressive policy commitments to ensure universal access to early learning, structural and socioeconomic inequalities, capacity challenges, resource constraints, and entrenched power dynamics continue to prevent many, particularly marginalized children, from accessing quality early learning opportunities.

Utilizing an interpretive qualitative approach, this report draws on the 3C framework—the catalytic conditions of capacity, commitment, and cohesion—to assess the strengths and gaps within the South African early learning ecosystem and to explore how these factors support or hinder education systems transformation. The report also explores how network-based models, such as SmartStart, a network of and platform for early learning providers, present opportunities and learnings for ensuring equitable access to quality early learning for all young children in South Africa.

Based on the analysis utilizing the 3C framework, the study demonstrates the need for policymakers and ECCE actors to find cohesion around a shared purpose amidst fragmentation, commit to realizing policy intentions in practice (including revising policies to achieve said intentions), and build on the existing capacities and strengths of the ECCE ecosystem to transform early learning in South Africa. Building on the findings, the report offers practical recommendations for ECCE change-makers, as well as state and non-state actors in South Africa. The recommendations emphasize the importance of mobilizing local actors and building productive partnerships between policymakers, government, civil society, practitioners, and communities. Finally, the report highlights the broader systemic shifts required to strengthen and sustain the transformation of early learning opportunities in South Africa.

In South Africa, of the approximately 3.5 million children aged 3-5, approximately 1.15 million remain excluded from any form of early learning.



3. ECCE is defined as the range of out-of-home care and educational settings that children experience between birth and school entry. It is a specific sector of services within the larger universe of early childhood development (ECD) policies and programs, which encompass health, nutrition, child protection, and social protection, as well as water, sanitation, and hygiene policies.

# INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Despite growing recognition globally of the importance of ECCE for both human development and societal transformation, the promise of universal access to early learning remains largely unfulfilled in many countries (UNESCO 2024). According to recent UNESCO data, nearly 60% of children in low-income countries lack access to quality ECCE, compounded by systemic inequalities and poverty (OECD 2017; UNESCO 2024).

In South Africa, poverty, gender inequality, and legacies of apartheid and colonialism continue to reinforce systemic exclusion, particularly in rural, informal, and township settings.

In South Africa, poverty, gender inequality, and legacies of apartheid and colonialism continue to reinforce systemic exclusion, particularly in rural, informal, and township settings (Levy et al. 2021). Notably, a publication by Statistics South Africa revealed that approximately 38% of the population was still living below the lower-bound poverty line of around \$81<sup>4</sup> per person per month in 2023 and about 18% below the food poverty line of \$42<sup>5</sup> per month in the same year (Republic of South Africa 2025). Furthermore, Black South Africans and women—especially Black women—are disproportionately represented among those experiencing poverty and face compounded barriers to accessing essential services (Republic of South Africa 2021). As a result, families navigating unreliable access to basic necessities and competing demands are unable to prioritize early learning. These mutually reinforcing patterns of exclusion further the disparity in access to ECCE, where children from wealthier households are

twice as likely to attend early learning programs (ELPs) as those from poor families (Hall et al. 2024).

Since the establishment of formal democracy in 1994, the South African government has made strides toward building a more equitable schooling system with policies designed to bridge socioeconomic gaps and alleviate poverty. Over time, this reform agenda expanded beyond formal schooling to recognize the importance of learning and development in the early years. ECCE was first recognized in education policy in 1995 and further consolidated in the 2015 National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (DBE 2001, 2015; Mc Lennan 2017). Originally under the purview of the Department of Social Development (DSD), in 2022, responsibility for Early Childhood Development (ECD) was transferred from the DSD to the Department of Basic Education (DBE). This transition signaled a growing commitment to align early learning with the broader education system, reinforced by South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes published in 2023 (DBE 2023). Government officials have also been speaking to the importance of ECCE not only in policy but in public discourse. In 2025, for example, President Cyril Ramaphosa acknowledged the state's failure to prioritize early learning in the past and noted ECCE's potential to break cycles of poverty and exclusion (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2025).

4. Equivalent to approximately ZAR 1,058 per person per month in 2023.

5. Equivalent to approximately ZAR 760 per person per month in 2023.

South Africa faces significant inequities in access to quality early learning for all children, with approximately 1.15 million children aged 3-5 still excluded.

Despite these progressive policy commitments<sup>6</sup> and the transfer of responsibility for ECD to the DBE in 2022, fragmented delivery, structural inequalities, uneven resources, and weak state-community coherence continue to prevent many young children in South Africa from accessing quality early learning, leaving its transformative potential as-yet unrealized (Hall et al. 2024). South Africa faces significant inequities in access to quality early learning for all children, with approximately 1.15 million children aged 3-5 still excluded (Hall et al. 2024; World Bank 2024). As such, South Africa has yet to establish a cohesive societal ECCE system that can transform pedagogical practices and support diverse providers

for universal quality access (Giese et al. 2023). Persistent misalignment between regulatory norms and on-the-ground realities continues to limit equitable access for millions of children (DBE 2023). Situated at this critical juncture, this study analyzes how the catalytic conditions of capacity, commitment, and cohesion influence access to quality early learning across South Africa's diverse governance structures and delivery contexts. Through an examination of the case of SmartStart, which has evolved to scale ECCE through a social franchise and delivery platform, this study explores the opportunities and challenges of network-based approaches for education systems transformation.

## METHODOLOGY

### Analytical framework

The 3C framework, developed by CUE, builds on an early-stage inquiry carried out by the Brookings Institution (CUE n.d.). The framework's elements—capacity, commitment, and cohesion—are designated as the intermediate expected outcomes of the Knowing-Doing Network, of which NEST (including SmartStart) is a part. This initial work suggests that the 3Cs are critical levers in the transformation of any education ecosystem.

The framework defines the Cs in the following way:

**Capacity.** Improve the knowledge, skills, and resources required by all stakeholders to eliminate systemic barriers toward the breadth of skills and learning what matters.

**Commitment.** Increase the interest, engagement, and action of all stakeholders to effectively reorient and resource education systems to support a breadth of skills and learning what matters.

**Cohesion.** Develop a shared vision and agenda for transforming systems by implementing policies and practices that support the breadth of skills and learning what matters.

6. This includes the South African cabinet's December 2024 approval of the National Strategy to Accelerate Action for Children (NSAAC), which the president highlighted "will be implemented through the 5th National Plan of Action for Children 2025-2030" (The Presidency 2025).

## Research questions

This study is anchored in the overarching research question co-created by the NEST: How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters? Guided by the 3C framework, the study explores how South Africa’s early learning system is—and is not—creating access to quality early learning for all children, with a particular focus on marginalized children. To this end, the study addresses the following country-specific research questions:

1. How does the existing early learning ecosystem in South Africa enable or hinder access to quality learning opportunities for all young children?
2. What can be learned from network-based models such as SmartStart about navigating existing contextual challenges in ECCE, and strengthening capacity, commitment, and cohesion toward education systems transformation?

## Methods

The study employed a two-phase qualitative research approach combining contextual system mapping with an analysis of the opportunities and challenges of a network-based approach to transforming ECCE in South Africa using the case of SmartStart. The research process was iterative, starting with the mapping of the context and conditions of early learning in South Africa. The contextual system mapping results informed the interview schedule and enabled participants to locate SmartStart’s praxis in the ECCE terrains and within the larger education ecosystem. Each of the research phases corresponds directly to one of the two research questions, as outlined in Table 1.

**TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN**

PHASES OF RESEARCH	CORRESPONDING RESEARCH QUESTION	EMPIRICAL METHODS
Phase 1: Context mapping	1. How does the existing early learning ecosystem in South Africa enable or hinder access to quality learning opportunities for all young children?	Literature review Desk-based mapping of early learning terrains and education systems
Phase 2: Case study (SmartStart)	2. What can be learned from network-based models, such as SmartStart, about navigating existing context challenges in ECCE and strengthening the three Cs toward education systems transformation?	20 key informant interviews Site visits to four SmartStart franchisors and ten franchisees <sup>7</sup>

7. The site visits spanned diverse geographical contexts: informal urban settlements in KwaZulu-Natal province; an urban SmartStart branch in Gauteng province; and areas of operation of franchisor partners Khululeka and Siyakholwa in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape province.

Working collaboratively in cross-sectoral partnerships, SmartStart establishes new early learning programs, by matching people to the opportunity, providing training, licensing, start-up financial resources, and ongoing quality assurance.

## PHASE 1: CONTEXTUAL MAPPING OF ECCE ECOSYSTEM

The first phase of the research employed a comprehensive literature review and desk-based mapping of the contextual dynamics of the ECCE ecosystem, examining what the 3 Cs look like across early learning terrains. Based on the literature review, the context mapping focused on the interconnected dimensions of:

**Rules and routines** (related primarily to cohesion), which highlight synergies and/or asymmetries between formal policies and everyday institutional practices.

**Resources** (related primarily to capacity), which are the financial, infrastructural, human, and social assets in society, including the agency and effort of women.

**Relationships** (related primarily to commitment) and their embedded power dynamics, networks, and trust mechanisms.<sup>8</sup>

## PHASE 2: SMARTSTART AS A NETWORK-BASED APPROACH TO ECCE

The second phase of the research examined the case of SmartStart as the largest and one of the most prominent ECCE networks in South Africa. Working collaboratively in cross-sectoral partnerships, SmartStart establishes new early learning programs by matching people to the opportunity and by providing training, licensing, start-up financial resources, and ongoing quality assurance that enable the delivery of locally affordable early learning in home- and community-based settings for approximately 160,000 children, most aged 3-5 years. Through site visits and interviews with central hub staff, franchisors, franchisees, branches, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the study explored how grassroots implementation through a network-based approach surfaces both opportunities and challenges around expanding access to quality early learning, especially for the most marginalized.

8. The mapping and analysis were informed by the prior development of a country non-specific "Childcare Systems Map" by the international Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN) and partners, including SmartStart, presented here (in the iteration available at the time of writing): <https://reimagined-futures.kumu.io/childcare-systems-map-ca8d52ad-f8f5-473e-ab23-9a8faf011749?token=XFBBboULuTALECa6>.

# FINDINGS

The analysis revealed how cohesion, commitment, and capacity are deeply interdependent. Fragmentation undermines shared purpose and systemic cohesion, weak implementation erodes sustained commitment, and unequal power dynamics constrain the capacity of women practitioners who hold the system together on the ground. Furthermore, the findings from both the contextual system mapping and case study demonstrated that the early learning system in South Africa is fragmented and perpetuates inequities across three approximate age-bounded terrains: family care (0-2), private home- and community-based and center-based provision (3-5), and state-provided Grade R (5.5+)—see Table 2.

Within the fragmented and inequitable context with the distinct terrains, SmartStart has taken a social network-based approach that seeks to expand quality access and reduce inequities for 3 to 5-year-olds by repositioning local women as agents of change. Based on the analysis of the 3 Cs, the findings demonstrate the need for policymakers and ECCE providers to find cohesion around a shared purpose amid fragmentation, commit to realizing policy intentions in practice, and build on the existing capacities and strengths of the ECCE terrains to transform early learning in South Africa.

**TABLE 2: DESCRIPTION OF EARLY LEARNING TERRAINS IN SOUTH AFRICA<sup>9</sup>**

TERRAIN	APPROXIMATE AGE RANGE	PROVISION TYPE	STATE INVESTMENT	KEY CHARACTERISTICS
<b>Primarily family-based in-home care</b>	0-2 years	In practice, ECCE for children aged 0-2 takes place predominantly within the home through care by parents and kin. This is unevenly supported by state health services, NGOs, and a limited offering of playgroup programs.	Centered on caregiver-led care in the home, with uneven support through health services and home visiting, rather than a formal early learning program.	Recognized in policy as a critical developmental period. characterized in practice by fragmented, uneven, and weak institutionalized support across health and community-based services.
<b>Home-, community-, and center-based care</b>	3-5 years	A diverse mix of home-, community-, and center-based programs. Delivery is by non-state actors, with many programs operating at small scale and under informal and partially compliant conditions.	Policy and subsidy frameworks exist within this terrain, but access and quality are uneven and far from universal. A significant proportion of programs are unable to access the state per-child-per-day subsidy, particularly in low-income and informal settings.	Served by a wide and active network of ECCE programs and organizations. Many programs remain unregistered or partially compliant, resulting in uneven access to public support and ongoing precarity for many providers, despite their central role in serving children and families.

9. The terrains were defined by age in line with UNICEF-defined conventions, also linked to research on “the first 1,000 days” (0-2); “the next 1,000 days” (3-5); and school foundation phase (6-8). See Draper et al. 2023 and Nores et al. 2023.

TERRAIN	APPROXIMATE AGE RANGE	PROVISION TYPE	STATE INVESTMENT	KEY CHARACTERISTICS
School-based Grade R	5+ years	Predominantly school-based provision delivered through state primary schools, with some provision in home-, center-, and community-based sites.	Direct and formalized public provision through the state schooling system with dedicated funding, norms, and standards, and clearer accountability mechanisms. Quality remains very uneven.	Grade R represents the most institutionalized and systematized form of ECCE, and is often the first point of consistent, state-supported early learning for many children. <sup>10</sup>

Source: SmartStart’s analysis of the context ECCE provision in South Africa

## Cohesion: Navigating fragmentation toward shared purpose

In this report, cohesion refers to the development of a shared purpose and agenda for early learning across state, non-state, and community actors. It is not simply about coordination between departments, or even about parallel commitment to the same goals. It requires actors to actively align around a common vision of what early learning is for, who it serves, and how responsibility for it should be shared. South Africa’s three-terrain structure makes this kind of systemic cohesion especially difficult to achieve.

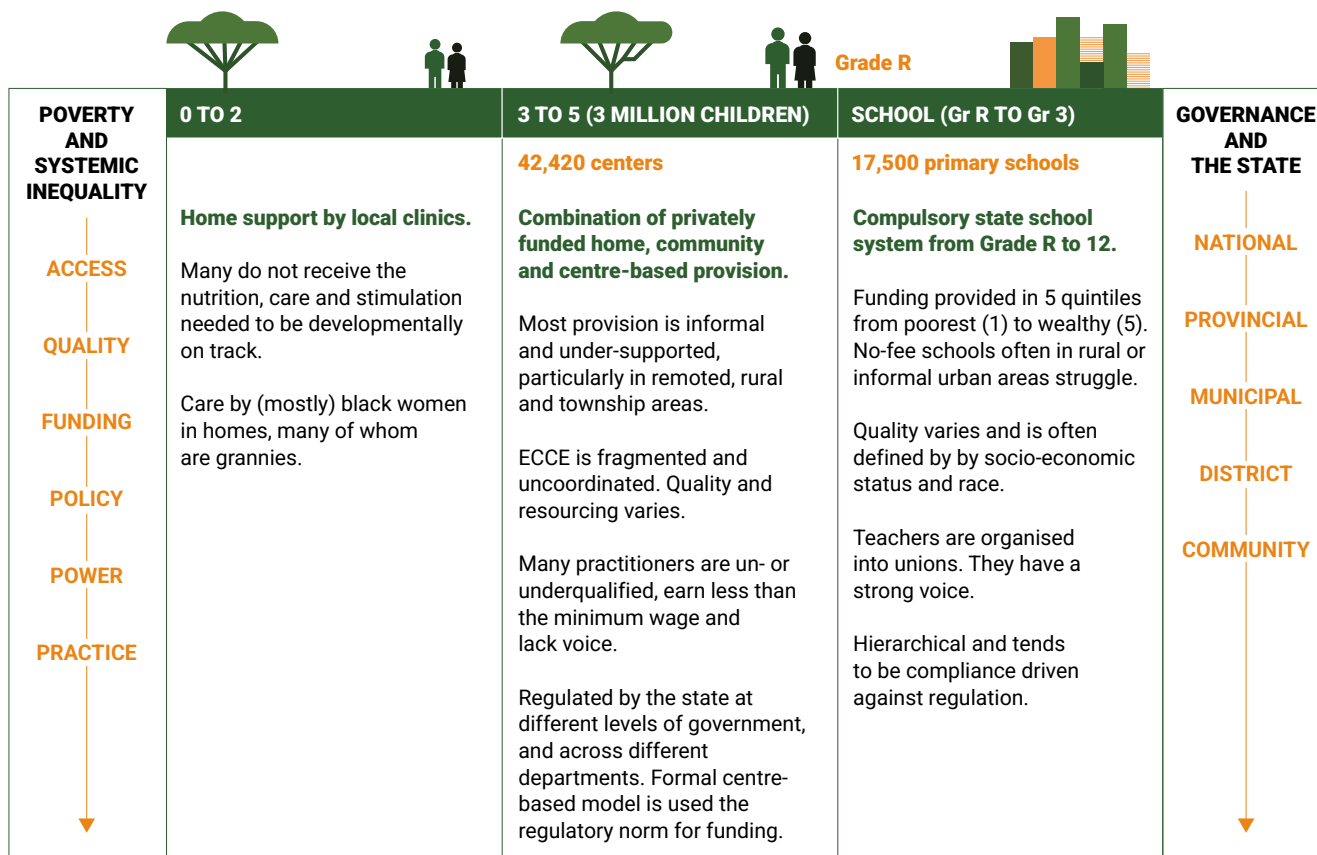
The contextual system mapping revealed that the three terrains, family-based home care (0-2), home- and community-based early learning provision (3-5), and state-provided Grade R (5+), operate with distinct governance logics, funding

mechanisms, and quality standards (see Figure 1). These terrains reflect the different ways in which early learning is organized and supported across the early childhood period, with responsibility, provision, and state involvement shifting substantially as children grow older. This fragmentation is not merely a coordination failure; it reflects the absence of a shared agenda across the actors who govern and deliver early learning at different stages. As a result, early learning has remained disconnected from formal systems until Grade R, limiting opportunities to position children for long-term success. Structural inequities, institutional silos, and inconsistent policy implementation compound the work of a sector that struggles to deliver on the promise of universal quality early learning. As a senior manager from the SmartStart network hub observed, “Understanding the system’s incoherence is vital. We cannot assume alignment; we must build it.”

Cohesion refers to the development of a shared purpose and agenda for early learning across state, non-state, and community actors.

10. While it plays an important role in preparing children for subsequent years of school, its relatively late placement in the early childhood period limits its ability to address the cumulative effects of earlier socio-economic and developmental inequalities (Draper et al. 2023).

**FIGURE 1: THE FRAGMENTED AND UNEQUAL EARLY LEARNING LANDSCAPE IN SOUTH AFRICA**



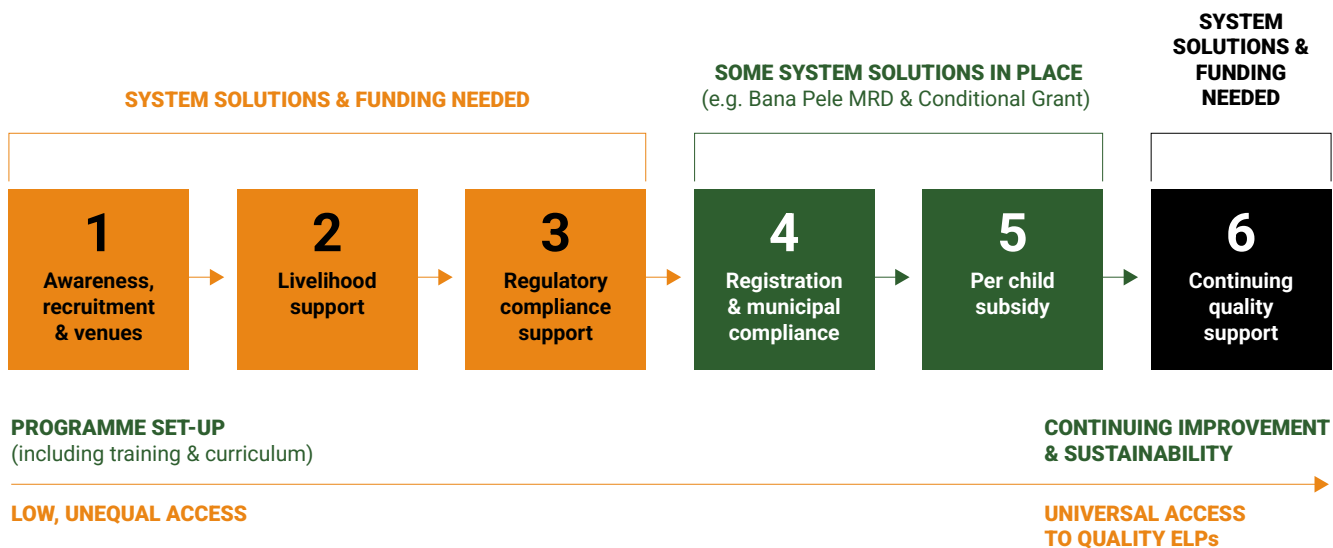
Source: SmartStart ECCE Context Map

The contextual system mapping also showed how entrenched inequalities and organizational disconnection hinder the development of a shared agenda across the three terrains. Despite stated policy commitment to expand access at the national level, fragmented practices across government departments and providers persist. An interviewee from National Advocacy Coalition Real Reform for ECD shared that if he could wave a magic wand, he would ask for “coordination in government and across departments, being clear about how they support ECD,” as “a lot of advocacy sits on coordination going right.”

SmartStart’s network approach aims to build cohesion—a shared sense of purpose around reaching

excluded children—through deliberate strategies. These include aligning decentralized actors around common design principles and pedagogical routines while allowing for contextual adaptation, partnering with NGOs and community organizations to establish shared standards and expectations for early learning provision, and—via the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive—working to build a common framework for bringing informal providers into a recognized system that the state can support. SmartStart’s model, illustrated in Figure 2, captures this theory of change: Cohesion is built incrementally, through active investment in enabling environments that support supply and quality improvements, particularly in under-resourced communities.

**FIGURE 2: SYSTEM ALIGNMENT CHALLENGES IN ELP LIFE CYCLE**



Source: SmartStart System Change Alignment 2025

However, the cohesion SmartStart has built within its network has not yet translated into system-wide shared purpose. Across the three legislated spheres of government, the picture is uneven: Collaboration around a shared agenda for reaching the most excluded children has been more sustained at the national level, more mixed at the provincial level, and most elusive at the local level—precisely where policy intent meets implementation on the ground. While some municipalities and traditional leaders have engaged as genuine collaborators in the ECCE agenda, others face capacity, coordination, or incentive-related constraints that limit their engagement. In some instances, these dynamics can slow or complicate implementation when incentives are misaligned or there

are competing priorities. Fragmentation continues to manifest through uneven recognition of informal providers and persisting structural inequalities that no single network actor can resolve. As a SmartStart staff member explained, “There are gaps in the system and the government needs assistance between reality and application of institutionalized systems, which calls for the need to meet delivery at that level of messiness.” The SmartStart case ultimately illustrates both the promise and the limits of building cohesion from the network outward: The kind of meaningful shared purpose that reaches across governance levels and provider types cannot be constructed by civil society alone and will require deeper structural commitments from the state.

## Commitment: Aligning policy intent with practice

A review of South African policy documents, prior literature, and recent developments reveals a growing prioritization as well as the possibility to expand access to quality ECCE. For example, the live Children’s Amendment Bill (CAB) has the potential to create a more enabling regulatory environment that better reflects the realities of informal and community-based provision and supports more programs to enter and remain within the system (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2024). This shift is reinforced by the DBE’s first national 2030 Strategy for ECD Programmes, which articulates a unified, long-term vision for universal access to quality ECCE, with a strong emphasis on equity and reaching the most marginalized children. Similarly, Bana Pele,<sup>11</sup> the DBE’s Mass Registration Drive, piloted by SmartStart and supported by other NGOs, is beginning to operationalize this vision by bringing unregistered programs into the state database and regulatory net.

Ahead, the opportunity is to support these programs in accessing the state ECD subsidy. Currently, many providers operate in constrained environments and need time, support, and investment to meet full compliance requirements (DBE, n.d.), especially those that constitute the conditions of “silver” registration status and eligibility for the subsidy. The government’s 2025 decision to increase the ECD budget to \$540-550

million—the largest single investment in this area to date—signals growing political commitment to ECCE at the national level. The increase restored the per-child-per-day subsidy from ZAR 17, where it had been frozen since 2019, to ZAR 24, and included ZAR 210 million for ECD infrastructure development. Alongside the combined and sustained advocacy of SmartSmart and partner organizations, this shift reflects a meaningful expansion of the state’s commitment to reaching excluded children.

Yet, the lived realities for many children and providers remain shaped by persistent implementation challenges. Interviews and site visits revealed that delays in subsidy payments by provincial departments, uneven compliance and registration processes, and ongoing barriers related to land use, infrastructure, and municipal requirements still constrain equitable access to quality early learning environments. These patterns were consistently reported across interviews with franchisors and franchisees and observed during site visits in multiple provinces.

The contextual system mapping demonstrated that state commitment to transforming early learning is often weakened or complicated as it cascades from national to provincial and local levels. Provincial variation was evident, as some regions exhibit more supportive regional ecosystems than others, reflecting uneven political will and fragmented accountability structures. ECCE at the local government level remains largely unactioned and unfunded.

Many providers operate in constrained environments and need time, support, and investment to meet full compliance requirements.

11. Sesotho and Setswana term meaning “children first.”

“The Education Minister struggled to determine how to integrate ECD into the DBE without it becoming a publicly provided model, emphasizing the need to retain a privately provided approach to ensure progress and avoid potential setbacks associated with full public provision.”

These findings point to an ecosystem in which commitment is expressed in policy but inconsistently enacted in practice for both systemic and structural reasons.

In this context, SmartStart demonstrates how commitment can be put into practice. As an ecosystem actor, it works to expand access to quality early learning—especially for the most marginalized children—while creating economic opportunities for women, through advocacy, partnerships, training, and local delivery. Evidence from the field showed that SmartStart’s commitment is enacted through embedded, locally mediated delivery structures, rather than abstract organizational functions. Through partnerships with local NGOs, the model provides ongoing coaching, training, and quality assurance to practitioners through locally deployed coaches supporting small clusters of programs. A senior manager stated, “SmartStart is an organization that took the role of advocating for early learning in the lower quintiles, the mandate of influencing government, and adopting certain ways of delivering childhood development.”

Yet, this commitment is constrained by the availability of public funds and consistent support. As one SmartStart executive shared, “the Education Minister struggled to determine how to integrate ECD into the DBE without it becoming a publicly provided model, emphasizing the need to retain a privately provided approach to ensure progress and avoid potential setbacks associated with full public provision.” Many practitioners report repeated registration delays and minimal financial return. A practitioner shared,

“I am in the business of building children, not making money.” These challenges highlight how, while SmartStart embodies commitment through practice, sustained transformation requires commitment by actors across the system to advance broader structural reforms and ensure coherent resource allocation beyond even what has been achieved by the largest network of ECCE practitioners in the country.

## Capacity: Expanding what the ECCE system can do and learn

Policy developments have been complemented by efforts to mobilize resources and remove capacity constraints for ECCE. The Technical Task Team on ECD Red Tape Reduction, for example, has been working across departments and with local governments to develop more accessible approaches to the municipal requirements for ECCE compliance and registration (National Planning Commission 2025). The reduction of red tape is an enabler of local, currently informal, early learning.

However, reduced administrative burdens paired with increased budget commitments do not automatically translate into expanded capacity on the ground. The 2025 ECD budget increases include a restored per-child-per-day subsidy, new infrastructure, and new nutrition allocations. While these increases are intended to extend access to early learning for approximately 700,000 more children over the medium

term, governments across spheres are now under significant pressure to spend this funding appropriately and effectively. The capacity to deploy resources equitably, and to ensure they reach the providers and children who need them most, remains uneven. This gap between budget allocation and implementation capacity, as seen through the mapping of the ecosystem and from various interviews, remains a challenge for ECCE in South Africa.

In addition to funding challenges, the context system mapping revealed that the current system mirrors and perpetuates inequities along historical and structural lines. Unpaid reproductive labor in South Africa is largely carried out by women and shaped by entrenched norms around the private and gendered nature of childcare. Women, particularly Black women from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, informally provide the majority of ECCE while remaining undercompensated and excluded from decisionmaking (Biersteker and Dawes 2008; DBE 2015). Limited access to affordable formal childcare further restricts women's economic participation (Bryer and Van Leeve 2022).

The findings suggest that women's labor is not simply marginalized within the ECCE system, but is structurally relied upon to sustain provision under conditions of scarcity. Across interviews and site visits, practitioners described working long hours for minimal or inconsistent income while simultaneously framing their work in moral rather than economic terms, expressing, "we are here for the children." This dual dynamic of material precarity with moral commitment

enables the continued functioning of ELP in contexts where state support is inconsistent or absent. However, because they are not fully integrated into the formal education system, many practitioners are forced to operate in informal or semi-formal conditions, absorbing the risks associated with underfunding, delayed subsidies, and regulatory barriers.

Fieldwork further indicates that this is not simply a matter of insufficient funding or a lack of systemwide capacity to implement programs. Even where training and support are provided through network models such as SmartStart, practitioners remain constrained by broader structural conditions, including weak local government support, uneven infrastructure, and limited pathways to formal recognition. Taken together, these findings point to a system in which women's unpaid or underpaid labor effectively subsidizes early learning provision. This "hidden subsidy" sustains access in the short term, but simultaneously reinforces the informal, low-status positioning of ECCE work, limiting the potential for systemic transformation.

SmartStart's network model attempts to disrupt these dynamics by investing in capacity strengthening with various actors in the South African ECCE ecosystem. Its platform design enables scale without heavy infrastructure, incrementally building skills through practitioner training and local partnerships. "Franchisors have the power of proximity and have a relatability that allows them to focus on translating a national message to local relevance," said one SmartStart manager.

**"Systems orchestrating is going to be hard if we want to do everything. That is why we need to harness the true power of SmartStart, which is franchisors and franchisees."**

Deep capacity challenges remain for local governments, traditional authorities, and public service systems, which are critical for supporting community-level ECD programs and infrastructure.

SmartStart network partner NGOs in the Eastern Cape, such as Khululeka and the Siyakholwa Development Foundation, illustrated how localized initiatives can expand capacity by integrating early learning with broader community development priorities—especially nutrition, outdoor play, and income generation. Siyakholwa, for example, uses the Jobs Fund to train local community members in food growth, carpentry, and recycled toy-making. The products are used to provide nutrition, climbing infrastructure, and toys to the learning programs they support. These approaches demonstrated how relational and cultural capital can enhance system capacity when centered in program design.

At the same time, systemic constraints persist. Deep capacity challenges remain for local governments, traditional authorities, and public service systems, which are critical for supporting community-level ECD programs and infrastructure. The research shows that perhaps the most promising way to grow ECD awareness, increase participation, and strengthen program implementation in communities is by working through existing local leadership structures. Traditional leaders interviewed saw themselves as “activists for ECD,” playing a central role in mobilizing communities and fostering collective responsibility for children’s development. As one leader explained, “The gateway to the children is the local leaders,” when emphasizing that the sustainability of ECD programs in a community is not solely built on policy, registration, and mandates from government, but the buy-in of local leadership, which guides

and governs the community. This highlights two things: That successful capacity expansion depends on relational governance, trust, and shared accountability, and that local leadership engagement is key to scaling effective ELPs.

Ultimately, SmartStart’s move toward repositioning informal providers as legitimate agents of delivery rather than peripheral actors challenges existing hierarchies. SmartStart implements a “network, not a ladder” approach that seeks to distribute leadership and foster learning. SmartStart operates as a multi-layered national network linking a central platform with partner organizations and locally based practitioners who deliver services. Rather than a progression-based hierarchy, it is designed as a distributed system that coordinates many independent actors through clearly defined roles and relationships into a unified delivery model.

The findings suggest that, while SmartStart’s model has begun to reconfigure recognition through networked relationships and professional support, this reconfiguration has not yet fully translated into systemic recognition or materially improved conditions. The idea of a “network, not a ladder” is, therefore, only partially realized in practice, constrained by both internal model tensions and wider structural conditions. A SmartStart executive shared, “Systems orchestrating is going to be hard if we want to do everything. That is why we need to harness the true power of SmartStart, which is franchisors and franchisees.” Without further formal recognition and state support in practice at provincial and local levels, these

capacities remain precarious. The broader ECCE system continues to rely on the un(der)paid labor and knowledge of women while undervaluing their contributions. Addressing capacity,

therefore, requires redistributing not only resources, but also power and recognition, between the state, civil society, and across national, provincial, and local levels of government.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are grounded in the findings across cohesion, commitment, and capacity. Because these conditions are deeply interdependent, the recommended actions are designed to work in tandem to strengthen the ecosystem as a whole. Where relevant, the analysis notes which conditions are most directly implicated.

### 1. BUILD AND STRENGTHEN MULTISECTORAL PARTNERSHIPS AND CONNECT COALITIONS OF NON-STATE ACTORS TO UNITE FRAGMENTED TERRAINS

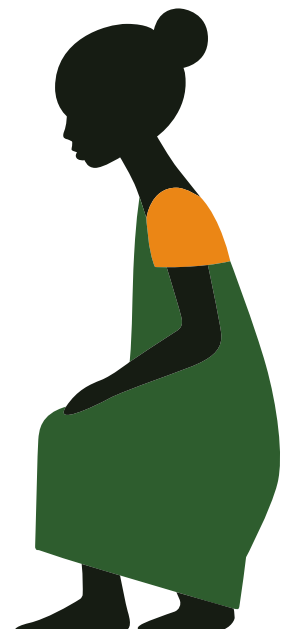
The findings revealed that uniting the fragmented terrains requires collaborative, multisectoral coordination and systems transformation strategies. Additionally, SmartStart's model demonstrates the value of positioning and/or recognizing non-state actors as system connectors and amplifiers.

#### Actions:

Support and extend local governance partnerships and provincial delivery ecosystems, strengthening both commitment and cohesion that are rooted in specific contexts, and leverage local capacity and leadership.

Support non-state actor networks that can construct, connect, and sustain coalitions across fragmented institutional and sectoral boundaries.

Amplify the voices of underpaid practitioners working directly with children, whose individual contributions and collective power are key to unlocking quality learning for young children.



## 2. REFRAME INVESTMENT IN EARLY LEARNING AS A STRATEGIC NATIONAL PRIORITY BEYOND THE EDUCATION SECTOR

Evidence from the context systems mapping offers key insights into the gaps in the ECCE-to-formal schooling trajectory. Systemic transformation depends on the ability to mobilize and sustain wider political and societal will for sustained investment in early learning needs. These investments need to be reframed as a strategic national priority with long-term benefits not just for children's life opportunities, but also for skills development, enterprise opportunities, women's economic empowerment, poverty reduction, and wider socioeconomic development.

### Actions:

Enable municipalities and education districts to implement new practices while hearing and valuing the local experience of officials.

Earmark funding for implementation of ECCE networks and initiatives.

## 3. RECOGNIZE AND SUPPORT INFORMAL HOME- AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROVISION AS CORE TO EARLY LEARNING

The current Bana Pele Mass Registration framework has made important strides in enabling informal home- and community-based providers to register and access government subsidy support, helping bring previously unregulated programs

into the recognized early learning system. However, this transition is still constrained by regulatory and infrastructure limitations, and much remains to be done to improve implementation on the ground.

Policymakers and regulators need to maintain flexibility within existing compliance and implementation frameworks to better reflect the realities of informal early learning provision and ensure that access and quality continue to expand.

### Actions:

Adopt and sustain an asset-oriented approach that sees and values women's abundant contributions, and resources "informal" and "home-based" provisions accordingly.

Adapt bronze (first stage) registration for programs to provide a set-up subsidy, enabling women to establish themselves within the system as microenterprises, and to move forward to satisfy the requirements of silver status and eligibility for the per-child per-day subsidy.

Review the requirements for silver registration on an ongoing basis, attending especially to any categories of early learning programs that are structurally constrained from satisfying these requirements.

With the passage of the Children's Amendment Bill, simplify registration processes and provide realistic, supportive compliance standards and infrastructure.

# CONCLUSION

South Africa's ECCE ecosystem stands at a pivotal moment. Thousands of women's contributions and efforts persist, with growing support, amid many challenges and constraints. Policy commitments and increased budget allocations to early learning have grown over time. Still, the system remains fragmented and inequitable due to disjointed governance, weak coordination between departments, under-resourcing, and wider socioeconomic dynamics rooted in South Africa's unequal history.

The SmartStart case highlights both what is possible and what remains challenging. SmartStart's network-based model, drawing on social franchising and a delivery platform, demonstrates how local actors, networked nationally, can build cohesion, commitment, and capacity by activating, enabling, and amplifying

the expertise of women practitioners. It does so by strengthening community networks, translating shared purpose into grassroots action, and ensuring that grassroots realities inform more coherent government policies. Yet the case of SmartStart also highlights that local innovation alone cannot overcome systemic constraints. Systems transformation is necessary and remains collective work. For South Africa to transform ECCE more profoundly, national structures must recognize and support community-driven models, redistribute power and resources more equitably, and align policy intent with practical implementation—all while working with local state and non-state actors. By connecting local innovation to national commitment, South Africa can move toward an early learning system that is inclusive, coherent, and capable of supporting every child's holistic development.

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# ANNEX 1: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

There are diverse understandings of the terms used in this report. This glossary provides an overview of how the terms are used in the South African context. These definitions are drawn from policies and research on early childhood development.

**Early childhood development (ECD)** became part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. These global goals include a commitment to ensure that, by the year 2030, all children will have equitable access to quality early childhood development and early learning opportunities. UNICEF’s Nurturing Care Framework (UNESCO 2023) sees health, learning, nutrition, caregiving, and safety as key, interrelated components of ECD.

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**Early learning** is defined by the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (Republic of South Africa 2015, 12) as “programmes 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.” Early learning programs (ELPs) use play-based activities to support children’s early cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development.

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**Franchisees**, in SmartStart’s language, are ECCE practitioners operating early learning programs as local micro-enterprises supported by SmartStart. Franchisors, in SmartStart’s language, are NGOs in the SmartStart network licensed and responsible for selecting, setting up, supporting, and quality-assuring franchisees

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**Practitioners** provide care and stimulation to children through early learning. This includes educators, trainers, and caregivers involved in providing services in homes, centers, and schools who are formally or informally trained. Practitioners are usually women.

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**ECD centers (creches or schools)** are any physical spaces used to care for more than six children away from their caregivers or parents. These spaces may be in homes, community buildings, churches, or purpose-built centers and schools.

**Registration** is the process that enables ELPs to receive a per-day, per-child subsidy. The subsidy is unlocked when an ELP meets the specified requirements, such as details about the program (including staff composition and financial statements), practitioner qualifications, building plans, zoning certificates, and so forth. Many of these criteria are out of reach for home- and community-based learning programs. A new developmental registration framework introduced two stages of conditional registration—bronze and silver—which allow progressive compliance. A mass registration drive, using a more accessible and simplified process, aims to get all out-of-home ELPs into the regulatory net.

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**Grade R** is a pre-school, compulsory reception year of early learning for all five-year-olds. It is the year before Grade 1, the first year of foundation phase schooling. Grade R is provided for in public and private schools, as well as larger home- and community-based ECD centers. Grade R was recently made compulsory, and over 90% of children aged 4-6 are attending.

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