



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

Born free, but not fair: Setting the foundation for long-term learning and earning Interventions that support childhood development in the first 1,000 days of a child's life have the potential to radically shift South Africa's current inequality crisis.

By Michelle Flowers and Daryl Swanepoel

There are about 6.5 million children in South Africa under the age of six. Four million of them live in the poorest 40% of households and three million of them live in rural areas. This means that the majority of children are born into contexts that make it difficult for them to realise their potential. On their journey towards quality jobs, most of South Africa's young people have the odds stacked against them, starting as early as their first years of life.

A report released by the Inclusive Society Institute - called "Understanding Youth Inequality" - shows that young people's future chances often begin articulating in very early childhood, setting in motion a range of inequities that tend to widen as children move through school and into the workforce. Race, geography and gender, all of which are outside of young people's control, continue to constrain the possibilities available to them in profound ways. In 2022, 8.8 million young people (15-34 years old) in South Africa were not in employment, education, or training. The majority of this group are Black, income-poor, without a qualification, and live in households with no employed members.

The report is about how those inequities play out over young people's life course and, importantly, what strategies might be taken to interrupt them, both to improve their chances of social and economic mobility, and to disrupt structural patterns of inequality.

Early Childhood Development (ECD) services – including nutrition, early learning, healthcare and social services – has the potential to improve children's development and future chances, increasing primary school enrolment, improving academic performance and reducing school dropout. In the critical first 1,000 days of a child's life, infants and caregivers are expected to receive Early Childhood Development (ECD) services at home, from community health workers, hired as part of clinic-based outreach teams. As they grow older, children are most likely to receive care through an Early Learning Programme (ELP), but with limited government subsidies, access to these services is dependent on caregivers' ability to pay fees.

Research shows that young children who grow up in poor households are more likely to be excluded from early learning and health services because their families cannot afford transport to clinics or government offices, or because the fees of early learning programmes are unaffordable. Deeply entrenched inequality is evident by the fact that two-thirds of Black children live below the poverty line compared to 2% of White children. This means that most Black children are starting their schooling career on an unequal footing. It also illustrates the inextricable link between income levels, access to early learning programmes and child outcomes - further driving South African inequality. And even though access to early learning programmes has expanded over time, there is still stark inequality in the distribution and quality of programmes, and the level of funding from the government.

The report recommends focused government investment in the ECD workforce and quality ECD services in order to reduce this gap.

Currently, only about 1.5% of the country's GDP is spent on ECD, most of which goes to child support grants. A mere 6.5% of this budget is allocated for early learning, nutrition support, and supportive parenting programmes.

For the government to unlock the multiplier effects of early childhood development, the first key lever is to access public financing to pay and skill the ECD workforce through Sector Education and Training Authorities or Public Employment Programmes. The second key lever is to develop more inclusive regulatory frameworks that allow unregistered ECD sites to access funding and quality support. The recent relinquishing of NPO-registration as a requirement for funding eligibility is one example. Expanded funding would lighten the load on caregivers' need to pay fees and improve access to ELP for all children.

A major incentive for the government to unlock this financing is research that shows that investing in early childhood accrues benefits over the life course, with returns for schooling, tertiary education, employment prospects, and ultimately national budgets. Some models suggest that the elimination of stunting alone, could generate an additional R62 billion a year, which would be enough to subsidise a national early learning programme for 0–5-year-olds, while also reducing the funding shortfall at tertiary institutions. If universal access to early learning translated into better basic education outcomes and a fully literate working-age population, some researchers suggest the country's GDP would be expected to grow by a quarter.

But investing in ECD goes far beyond a return on investment, presenting an opportunity to radically shift intergenerational inequality in South Africa. This is not only because it unlocks the developmental potential of children, but also because it means supporting quality jobs in the community and social services sector, where women are heavily represented. Community, social, and personal services is the only sector that added jobs for young people from 2017 Q1 to 2022 Q2, most of which (over 60%) have been to women.

Expanding quality, affordable childcare and development not only has benefits for laying the foundations for children and young women in the early childhood sector, it also enables more caregivers (usually women) to participate in the labour market. Given that caregiving responsibilities can often delimit young women's labour participation, this is essential to unlocking their economic potential and alleviating gender inequality in the labour market.

Unlocking the ECD sector has the potential to reduce inequality not only among children, but throughout the entire life cycle too, as well as alter the trajectory of future generations.

This article draws on the content of the recently published Inclusive Society Institute report under the title 'Understanding Youth Inequality'. Michelle Flowers is an occupational therapist and public health consultant at Percept. Daryl Swanepoel is the CEO of the Inclusive Society Institute.

February 2022