

Thought leadership piece

February 2019

Misfire: Migration of Early Childhood Development not a silver bullet

by Tess Peacock, Social Investment Specialist

During last week's State of the Nation Address (SoNA), President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that Government would migrate the responsibility of early childhood development (ECD) centres from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE).

His statement was met with a mix of excitement and confusion and poses more questions than it does answers. Without doubt, the hard work of ensuring improved access to quality holistic ECD services is far more complicated than a simple Departmental shift.

Although the Children's Act 38 of 2005 acknowledges the intersectoral nature of ECD services, it is clear that the responsibility of registering, supporting and monitoring ECD centres (or in the language of the Act "partial care facilities") lies with the DSD.

With this in mind, the powers the President is relying on to announce a function change from DSD to the DBE are unclear. Any function shift will require an amendment to the Children's Act and any amendments will trigger the constitutional obligations of the National Assembly and National Council of Provinces to facilitate public participation.

The move would foreground the importance of ECD at a national level, given the large emphasis on education in general. By linking ECD more directly with education outcomes and performance, it is possible that this critical sector may receive more funding, energy, resources and attention.

But, moving ECD to the DBE is not a panacea to the challenges facing the provision of ECD services in the country. There are concerns as to whether ECD would in fact be best placed within the education department.

There is the very real likelihood that ECD becomes viewed as "school for younger children", resulting in the "school-ification" of ECD. Tshikululu has visited many grade R classrooms and, all too often, we find 5 – 6-year olds sitting on chairs and behind desks (which are too big for them) with nothing on the classroom walls.

Young children naturally learn through creativity and play; this is essentially stifled in many of our grade R environments and it would be distressing if such an approach were extended to 3 – 4 year olds.

Many ECD centres in the country, although subsidised by the state, are currently run by entrepreneurial men and women, and effectively function as SMMEs. These centres are run in a decentralised way, making them accessible to communities. What does a function shift mean for their livelihoods and for the accessibility of ECD services by caregivers?

Moving the location of ECD will not address the problems related to a lack of coordination across the sector and government departments. We have to ensure that we do not end up spending time and money shifting poor delivery of services from one department to another. Much of what we need to

be doing is the hard work of building a well-planned coordinated, monitored and integrated response – across multiple departments – to the developmental needs of young children.

Moving the location of ECD centres will not ensure the effective management of under-provided services such as adequate nutrition resources for pregnant mothers and young children; High-quality parenting/caregiver support; Integrated support for children with disabilities; and Integrated language and early learning strategies from birth to school-going age.

For many the migration to the DBE signals something positive: a seemingly stronger department with more technical capacity and effective systems in place. But there are many things that we need to keep front of mind if such a move is going to be successful.

Fundamentally, ECD needs strong political will and guidance across numerous departments and government levels. Without this critical ingredient, the structural (re)arrangements for ECD in the country will have minimal impact on the actual quality of service delivery to young children.

Ends.

What is ECD?

ECD is typically defined as the period from conception to the point a child enters formal schooling (grade R). It is a period of remarkable growth and the most significant for a child's brain development. During this stage, children are highly influenced by their environment and the people who surround them.

As explained by UNESCO, ECD or early childhood care and education (ECCE, which is often used interchangeably with ECD), "is more than preparation for primary school. It aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing."

Its holistic nature makes it one of the most effective poverty interventions and includes services in support of primary caregivers, maternal and child health, nutrition strategies, early stimulation and social protection. Based on this, it therefore requires *many* departments (the DSD, DBE, Department of Health and Department of Home Affairs to name a few) and levels of government to work together in a coordinated and integrated fashion.

Our National Integrated ECD Policy recognises that "overwhelming scientific evidence attests to the tremendous importance of the early years for human development and to the need for investing resources to support and promote optimal child development from conception". Thus, ECD's inclusion in the SoNA (both now and in 2018) – as well as additional funding made available in recent years through a conditional grant – is an encouraging sign that Government is recognising the important role of ECD as a development and poverty reduction imperative.