



Learning Brief: Building Skills for the Future of ECD

Insights from the Seriti Institute × DO MORE FOUNDATION Online Workshop

December 2025

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Foreword

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is the foundation for lifelong learning, wellbeing, and opportunity. Yet the sector in South Africa faces significant challenges in ensuring that those in the ECD ecosystem have the skills, recognition, and pathways needed to thrive in their work and ensure young children achieve their optimal potential.

This Learning Brief, developed in partnership between the Do More Foundation and the Seriti Institute, captures key insights from a Seriti Talks Event held on 5th November 2025. This online webinar brought together a range of stakeholders across the sector and sought to explore how South Africa's ECD ecosystem can be strengthened by investing in skills and employability thereby ultimately contributing to better outcomes for children, families, and communities.

We would like to thank the participants and facilitators of the Seriti Talks session for making this Learning Brief possible. We hope this brief will spark continued dialogue and collaborative action among policymakers, funders, and practitioners, thereby translating insights into action and sustained workforce development. By investing in the people who care for and educate our youngest children, we invest in South Africa's future.

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“Partnerships are critical to enabling positive forward change. We also need a better understanding of the skills, gaps and opportunities in the sector. Communities have strengths and we need to work with them to understand and leverage off these.”

Stakeholder in Parenting & Caregiver
Support Breakout Room Discussion

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Table of Contents

01. Introduction
02. Opportunities for Skills & Employment:
Maternal & Child Health & Nutrition
03. Opportunities for Skills & Employment:
Child Social Protection & Safety
04. Opportunities for Skills & Employment:
Parent & Caregiver Support
05. Opportunities for Skills & Employment:
Early Learning
06. Cross-Cutting Themes
07. Risks & Opportunities
08. Reflection & Next Steps

Introduction



****Image above: Webinar participants' responses to "one word that describes the future of ECD"***

This Learning Brief brings together insights from the Seriti Institute × Do More Foundation Online Workshop held on 5 November 2025, which explored how an enhanced focus on skills development and employability can strengthen ECD service delivery in South Africa.

Drawing on findings from the Evaluation of the National Integrated ECD Policy, conducted by Genesis Analytics for the DBE and UNICEF South Africa, the session invited stakeholders to reflect on the NIECD Policy (2015) areas through a workforce lens.

The conversation aimed to identify priority skills, address existing gaps, and highlight emerging opportunities for sustainable livelihoods within the ECD sector.

In themed breakout rooms (Maternal & Child Health & Nutrition, Child Social Protection & Safety, Parenting & Caregiver Support, and Early Learning) the following questions were discussed:

- What skills are needed to strengthen ECD service delivery?
- How can we collectively address skills gaps and strengthen pathways into work?
- Where do the employability opportunities lie within the sector?

The discussions captured were shaped by the perspectives of practitioners, policymakers, funders, and training providers who are collectively working to reimagine ECD as both a developmental and employment engine.

These insights will inform future collaboration and learning efforts aimed at strengthening the ECD workforce and improving child outcomes.



Skills Needed

- Specialised knowledge in child nutrition and age-appropriate meal planning for optimal growth and development
 - Understanding of health monitoring and early identification of malnutrition or developmental delays
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Skills Gaps & Pathways

- Lack of integration between health services and ECD centres, creating missed opportunities for holistic care
 - NGOs often have effective nutrition and health programmes but struggle with funding and marketing to scale their impact
 - Training programmes are not always aligned with current health system needs, and there is uncertainty about job placement after training
 - Low pay for nutrition-focused roles threatens retention of skilled professionals in the sector
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Employability & Sustainability

- Partnerships between the Department of Health and ECD Directorate of the DBE could create sustainable roles for health monitoring and nutrition support
- Sustainable career paths depend on fair hourly wages to ensure that trained professionals remain in the sector



Skills Needed

- The ability to identify at-risk children, signs of abuse, neglect, and trauma, and knowledge of mandatory reporting procedures
- An ability to interpret non-verbal cues of distress
- Ethical communication and stakeholder engagement skills for collaborating with social workers, family members, community members, and healthcare professionals
- Data collection and monitoring skills to track concerns and support referrals
- Skills to empower parents with knowledge of nurturing care and positive parenting



Skills Gaps & Pathways

- Lack of awareness on referral pathways, and what to do and where to go with issues of social security
- Training is often inaccessible, theoretical, and lacks post-training mentorship
- There is a need for practical, ongoing training with mentorship from social workers



Employability & Sustainability

- Job opportunities include social workers, home-visitor and community child-safety roles
- A major challenge is the reliance on short-term funding from public employment programmes
- Sustainability can be enhanced through stronger partnerships with the government and private sector



Skills Needed

- Specialised skills for working with children in the first 1000 days (0-3 years)
- Skills to conduct home visits and understand barriers to parental involvement in children's development
- Knowledge of positive parenting practices, nurturing care, and responsive caregiving to share with families
- The ability to empower parents with an understanding of their crucial role in their child's development



Skills Gaps & Pathways

- The gap between parents and ECD centres needs to be bridged
- Policies should be communicated to parents in a simple, accessible format
- Public employment programmes like the NYS can be valuable stepping stones
- Multi-sectoral partnerships are key to creating sustainable upskilling and employment opportunities for parent support workers



Employability & Sustainability

- Opportunities exist in caregiving, home-visiting and roles within ECD centres
- Parents and caregivers themselves can be upskilled to become peer educators, parent group facilitators, or family support workers
- The short-term nature of public employment programmes is a significant challenge to sustainability



Skills Needed

- Skills & knowledge in working with, and planning activities for, children of different age groups and developmental stages
- Inclusive education and special needs skills and knowledge to accommodate all learners
- Capacity building for practitioners to work with younger age group (0-3)
- Skills in creating and using educational toys and materials for cognitive stimulation and brain development
- Assessment and observation skills to track children's learning progress, school readiness, special needs and any developmental delays
- Skills to train parents and caregivers to support early learning at home



Skills Gaps & Pathways

- Critical gap in addressing the needs of children with disabilities; requires targeted training in disability awareness, mental health support, and strengthened community-based information and psychosocial services
- Significant gap in career pathways for working with children aged 0-3
- Training programmes need better standardisation across government, RTOs, and NPOs to ensure consistent quality
- Multi-sectoral partnerships are essential for creating upskilling and employment opportunities



Employability & Sustainability

- ECD centres can serve as community hubs for learning and job creation, creating opportunities for teachers, assistants, and support staff
- Opportunities exist for specialised roles such as special educational needs and disabilities training, toy library coordinators etc
- Multi-sectoral partnerships between certain government departments (e.g., DBE, Health, Agriculture) can create opportunities for ECD centre support staff, such as gardeners who teach children about food and cooks who model nutrition education



Emerging Themes

The Need for Practical, Accessible Training:

Across all thematic areas, there was a clear call for training that is practical, ongoing, and includes mentorship, rather than one-off theoretical workshops.

Workforce Sustainability is Critical: Participants consistently raised concerns that without fair, livable wages, the sector will continue to face high turnover, losing skilled and passionate workers. It was clear that investing in skills development must be coupled with strategies to ensure fair compensation.

The Importance of Multi-Sectoral Collaboration:

The discussions highlighted that no single sector can address the challenges alone. Stronger partnerships between the government, NGOs, the private sector, and communities are essential for creating sustainable pathways to employment and ensuring the well-being of children.

The Challenge of Short-Term Funding: A recurring theme was the reliance on short-term public employment programmes, which, while valuable, do not offer long-term career stability. This points to a need for more sustainable funding models.

Empowering Parents and Caregivers: All groups recognised the critical role of parents and caregivers and the need to support them with knowledge, skills, and confidence.

Support Employability Broadly: This focus should extend beyond the traditional ECD ecosystem, addressing the pervasive stress many parents face from unemployment by forging connections to external economic opportunities and employment services.



Risks

Lack of Sustainable Funding: The reliance on short-term funding poses a significant risk to the long-term viability of many promising initiatives and careers in the ECD sector.

Gaps in Training Pathways: The disconnect between training and the actual needs of the sector, as well as the lack of clear career pathways, risks leaving practitioners without the skills and qualifications they need to advance, or with skills for roles that do not exist or are not valued, preventing them from putting their new skills to use.

Burnout: Low pay and lack of support can lead to high turnover and a loss of skilled professionals from the sector.

Opportunities

Sectoral Skills Audit: A significant opportunity exists to conduct a national skills audit of the ECD workforce, aligning it with the framework of the NIECD Policy, to provide a clear evidence base to bridge the disconnect between training pathways and the actual needs of the sector. One example would include the need for more disability champions in the sector.

ECD Centres as Community Hubs: There is a significant opportunity to leverage ECD centres as hubs for a range of services, including parent support, health screenings, and boosting job creation overall.

Upskilling Parents and Caregivers: Investing in parents and caregivers not only improves child outcomes but also creates a new pool of skilled individuals who can contribute to the ECD workforce.

Reflections

The breakout discussions revealed both the complexity and the promise of strengthening South Africa's ECD workforce. Participants spoke with urgency about moving beyond fragmented, short-term interventions toward a more integrated, sustainable approach to skills development and employability.

A key insight was that skills alone are not enough. While participants identified critical technical competencies, from child psychology to nutrition expertise, they emphasised that these must be accompanied by systemic enablers: mentorship, recognition, fair pay, and clear career pathways. Parents and caregivers need not only information, but also emotional support, economic stability, and confidence in their capacity to nurture their children.

The discussions also surfaced a powerful tension around sustainability. Public employment programmes like NYS were celebrated as valuable stepping stones, yet the question echoed across groups: "What happens after six months?" This reflects a deeper concern about the precarity of ECD work and the need for funding models that support long-term livelihoods.

Finally, the conversations underscored the essential role of collaboration. The NIECD Policy framework provides a foundation, but its success depends on genuine integration across government, sustained private sector investment, and active community participation.

These reflections point to a fundamental shift: viewing ECD not merely as a service to be delivered, but as an ecosystem of care, learning, and opportunity that must be nurtured collectively.

Potential Next Steps

Based on the insights from the breakout discussions, here are some potential next steps for key stakeholders in the sector to consider:

- Conduct a comprehensive ECD workforce skills audit, benchmarked against NIECD Policy (2015) competencies and current sector needs, to identify gaps and inform targeted training
- Establish a multi-sectoral task team to improve coordination of existing efforts and move away from siloed approaches, and to explore sustainable, intentional funding models for the ECD workforce (with greater recognition of critical period of first 1000 days), including public-private partnerships
- Build structured pathways from volunteering and short-term placements to long-term employment
- Strengthen Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes to create pathways for experienced but uncertified practitioners to gain formal qualifications
- Develop and pilot standardised, practical training modules that can be delivered flexibly and include a strong mentorship component.



Seriti Institute is a leading South African non-profit established in 2009 to build resilient communities and unlock human potential. We deliver large-scale community development programmes in early childhood development (aRe Bapaleng has reached 100,000+ parents/caregivers ensuring that over 200.000 young children across South Africa are receiving higher quality early learning and development support), climate-resilient food security and agroecological enterprises (Work.Learn.Grow), youth employment pathways, and just-energy-transition livelihoods (GreenWorks). Using people-centred approaches, we strengthen families, create sustainable jobs, and foster dignity and opportunity nationwide. Seriti is a trusted partner to government, business, and donors.



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The **DO MORE FOUNDATION** is a proudly South African independent non-profit organisation founded by RCL FOODS in 2017. Its vision and purpose are to 'create better tomorrows for the young children and families of South Africa' through multi-sector partnerships. The Foundation provides a backbone role to the provision and roll out of various national programmes and community specific initiatives that center around the young child and align with the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy.



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