

# BANA PELE Sandpit

*Play. Learn. Grow. Together.*

## From Blueprint to Movement

Turning shared vision into collective action.

### Meet Andiswa Damane

The practitioner who says the children teach her too.

### Local Hands Make Light Work

How local partners are building stronger networks around young children.

### Digital Backbone

Connecting people, data and support across the early learning system.



# Contents

3

## Welcome

From the Bana Pele Secretariat

4

## From Blueprint to Movement

Kulula Manona and Roshene Singh

8

## Meet Andiswa Damane

Practitioner profile · Bubble Bee Educare

14

## From Neighbourhood to Nation

Thought leadership · Sanjay Purohit

17

## Local hands make light work

Action 15 · Community Hubs

22

## Leaving no child behind

Q&A · Wiedaad Slemming

26

## Listening for a Shared Story

Action 9 · Shared Narrative

32

## 52 Districts and Metros. One Shared Task.

Action 3 · Provincial and local government

36

## A More Connected Journey

Action 13 · Digital Backbone

40

## Making the Money Work Together

Action 8 · Funding orchestration

43

## Built to Enable

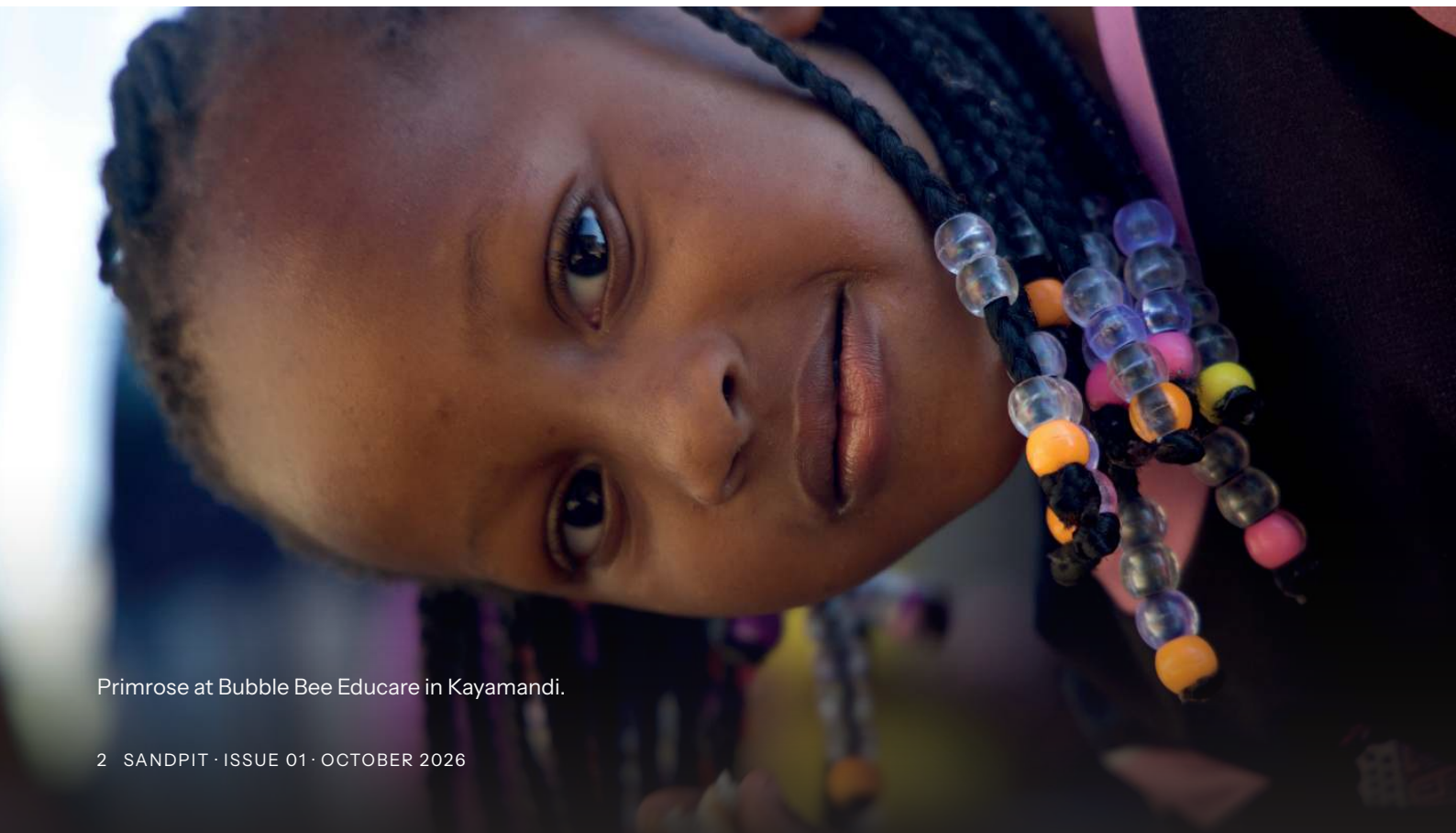
Government systems strengthening · eCares

48

## Bana Pele Orchestrators

The people behind the Blueprint

Primrose at Bubble Bee Educare in Kayamandi.





Waylin at Bubble Bee Educare in Kayamandi.

FROM THE BANA PELE SECRETARIAT

# Welcome

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The Bana Pele movement is already taking shape in communities, early learning centres, municipalities, places of worship, boardrooms and government systems across South Africa. This quarterly update brings together some of the people, ideas and partnerships helping turn the Shared Blueprint into action, from practitioners solving problems every day to organisations testing new ways of working together.

We are still in the beginning stage of bringing the Blueprint to life. This edition offers a snapshot of the progress being made across the Orchestration Team, and of the work already underway in different parts of the system.

What connects these stories is a simple belief: the answers do not sit in one institution or one plan. They emerge when people share what they know, build on what already exists and keep learning from one another.

We call it *Sandpit* because orchestrating for scale takes curiosity, creativity and imagination: playing, experimenting, learning and doing it together. We want every actor to feel unafraid to get messy and try new things. It is the beginner's mindset of a child, and it is what we need to reach scale.



Bongekile Jako leads children in song at Kiddies Love Day Care in Motherwell, Gqeberha.

# From Blueprint to Movement

South Africa has a shared plan for its youngest children, and the backing to act on it. What happens next depends on all of us.



BY KULULA MANONA, CHIEF DIRECTOR FOR FOUNDATIONS FOR LEARNING, DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION AND ROSHENE SINGH, BANA PELE SECRETARIAT

From Umlazi to Mthatha, Kliptown to Kokstad, early learning practitioners, parents, local government officials, faith leaders, funders and community organisations are rallying behind a growing movement anchored in a single idea: Bana Pele, putting children first. Their shared goal is universal access to quality early learning for every child in South Africa by 2030.

Too many children, particularly those from poorer communities, still enter primary school at a developmental disadvantage with negative consequences that can extend well beyond their school years. The Bana Pele Shared Blueprint was developed collaboratively across government, civil society and the private sector to help change that. It gives practical expression to putting children first by asking what needs to change, who needs to act and how the considerable expertise already present across the country can be brought together around one purpose.

The moment for that movement is now. The President has made early learning a national priority, while the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Early Childhood Development (ECD) he convened brings several departments together around a common agenda. In the 2026/27 Budget, the ECD grant received an additional R12.8 billion over three years, intended to expand subsidised services to another 300,000 children. That is significant backing, but it is not the finish line. Money alone will not carry us there.

South Africans know what can happen when a national problem is met with a shared plan and coordinated action. The progress made in stabilising electricity supply did not come from one institution acting alone. It required government, business and others to work differently and in concert.

Bringing departments, municipalities, NGOs, funders and practitioners around a common agenda means changing habits built over years. It means moving from isolated programmes to collective effort, from loyalty to our own solution to commitment to the problem and from waiting for a single hero to building coalitions of leaders.

People will bring different views, methods and mandates. What must hold us together is one non-negotiable: children come first. Real collaboration may mean sharing information institutions once held closely, aligning resources behind priorities larger than any one organisation and listening to practitioners and communities early enough for their experience to shape solutions.

That shift in mindset is part of building a movement. Instead of beginning with what belongs to my department, my organisation or my programme, the starting question becomes: what do children need from all of us?

There are already signs of what becomes possible when we work in this way. Since the start of the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive:

- **Almost 40,000 early learning programmes are now registered nationally.**
- **Of these, 23,847 have reached Silver or Gold registration, the levels required for access to the government subsidy.**
- **Since 2024, around 150,000 more children are benefiting from that support, with a total of almost a million children in registered programmes now accessing the subsidy.**



Children at Kiddies Love Day Care in Motherwell, Gqeberha, prepare for Grade R.

Different parts of government are also aligning around practical barriers. The Departments of Basic Education and Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs together with the South African Local Government Association have developed a Red Tape Reduction Toolkit and guidance for incorporating ECD into municipal Integrated Development Plans, rolled out to all metros and district municipalities. At community level, Bana Pele Community Hubs are bringing local organisations together around common priorities. And in work developing new digital tools, practitioners themselves have helped identify the everyday problems these tools will need to solve.

We want to continue improving the pace at which things are happening. We still have some barriers to reaching all programmes and ensuring that local partnerships have the support they need. A movement is not defined by the absence of problems, but by how honestly and courageously it faces them and how willingly people come together to solve them.

The Bana Pele Leadership Summit, taking place later this month under the theme “From Blueprint to Movement”, is an opportunity to widen that sense of ownership. The question for delegates should not simply be whether they support Bana Pele, but what they are prepared to contribute.

For government, that might mean strengthening its leadership to remove a barrier or better aligning a system more closely with practitioners’ realities. For funders and business, it may mean directing resources towards shared priorities rather than isolated initiatives. For sector organisations, it could mean sharing expertise, relationships or platforms so others can benefit. For families and communities, it means keeping children safe, nourished, loved and able to learn.

The Shared Blueprint can give this work direction. Public investment can expand what is possible. Policy can create the conditions for change. But no document, budget or institution can create a movement on its own.

Bana Pele becomes a movement when putting children first becomes a mindset we carry into the decisions we make, the resources we control and the way we work together. You do not need to work in early childhood development, or even have children of your own, to have a stake in that. Putting children first is ultimately an investment in the future we want for South Africa.

*Before joining the Bana Pele Secretariat, Roshene Singh served as the Chief of Staff and Deputy Director-General in the Office of the President.*



Praise and Mirabel at Bubble Bee Educare in Kayamandi.

PRACTITIONER PROFILE

# Strengthening the Network Closest *to the Child*

*Andiswa Damane* never wanted to be a teacher. Now, at  
Bubble Bee Educare, she teaches so the children can teach her.





Andiswa Damane with children at Bubble Bee Educare, Kayamandi.

## FACES OF BANA PELE

### Andiswa Damane

Teacher and “all-rounder”, Bubble Bee Educare · Kayamandi, Stellenbosch

**Children:** Around 23, including five babies

**Joined Bubble Bee:** 2024

**Team:** Sindiswa Cungwa, founder and principal; Nokwanda Mpotulo, Boland College volunteer

**Supported by:** Macfallen Nthongoa, ELRU; Xolela Dangala, Cape Winelands District Municipality Health Officer

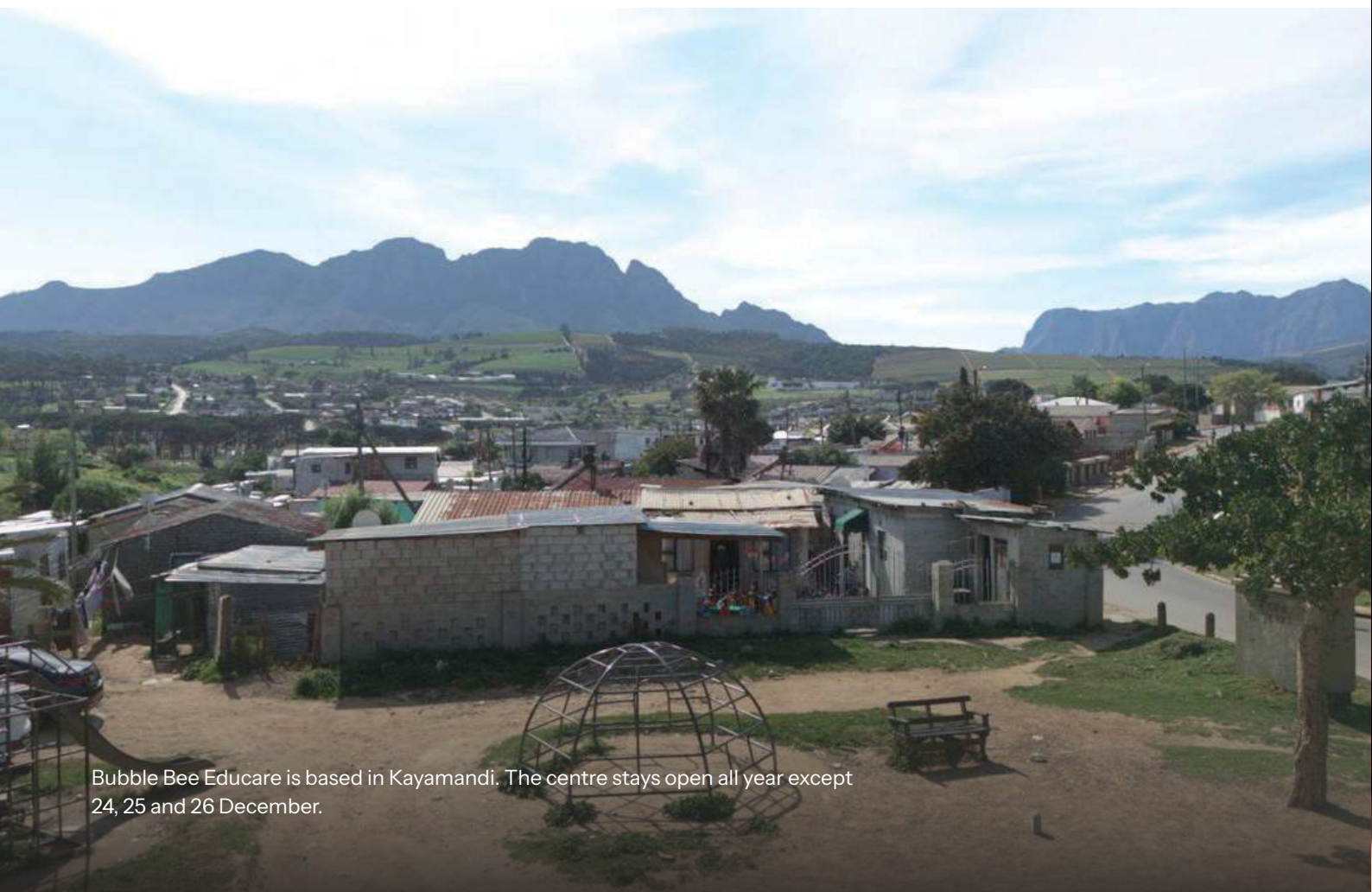
**A**t Bubble Bee Educare, Andiswa Damane has little use for job titles. “I’m an all-rounder, wherever I feel I can make a difference, I’m there,” she says. “The only title I don’t have is principal.” On any given day she might be caring for babies, teaching the older children, dancing, singing or settling an argument over a toy.

Andiswa says Bubble Bee was born out of necessity as a night care centre. When her mother, Sindiswa Cungwa, was retrenched from her cleaning job, she needed to find a new way of earning an income. “Honestly, at first it was about putting bread on the table,” Andiswa says. Ma Sindiswa saw a gap in the

market for parents working late shifts in Stellenbosch restaurants, many of whom finished at one or two in the morning.

She started with a handful of children in the family sitting room. But the idea caught on quickly. More working parents brought their children, and soon she was able to buy chairs, tables, blankets and toys. Today, Bubble Bee cares for around 23 children. Andiswa is helping carry the family enterprise into its second generation as a trained early learning practitioner, with a growing focus on what children learn, how they develop and the outcomes she can help them achieve.

*“Most of the children’s mothers work on farms or in restaurants,” Andiswa explains. “If we close, those children could be outside, doing what and with whom? We would be putting them at greater risk.”*



Bubble Bee Educare is based in Kayamandi. The centre stays open all year except 24, 25 and 26 December.

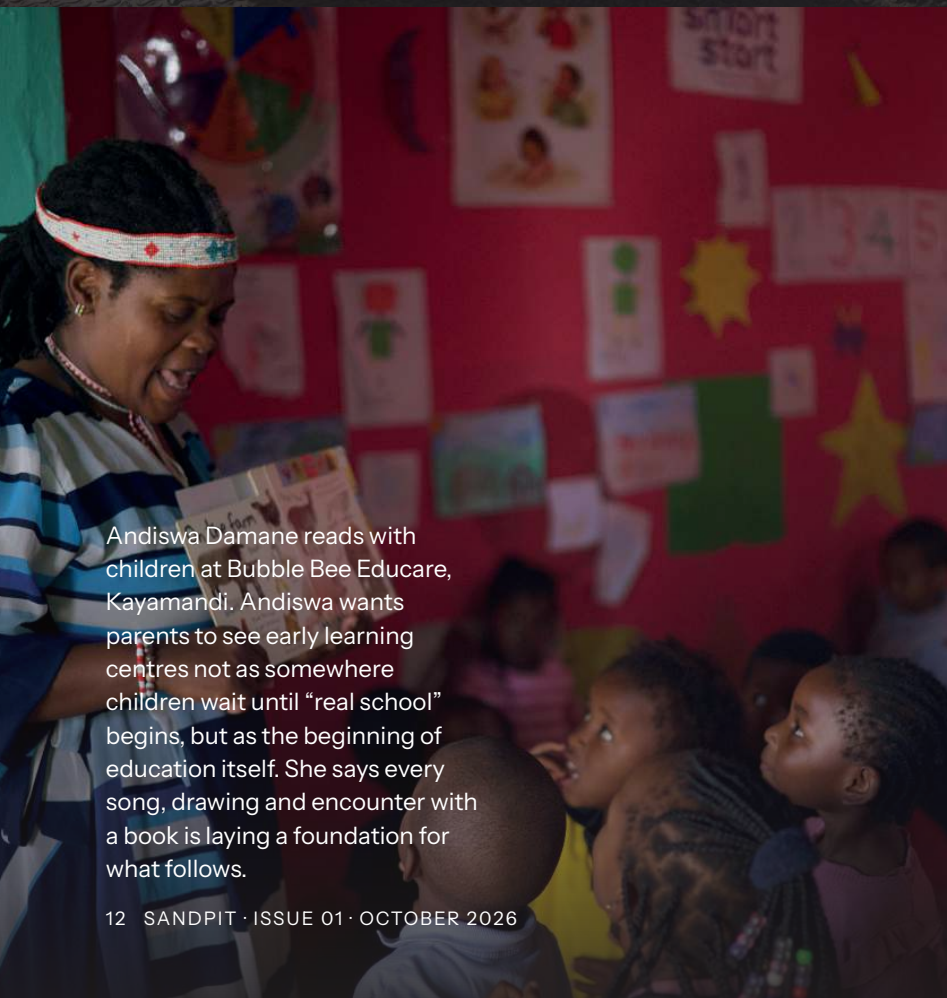
Andiswa says the children have taught her to listen and respond to the child in front of her. "If a child is bubbly, I need to be bubbly, dance and sing so that we're on the same level." If a child arrives upset, she responds differently. "If I start teaching while that child's heart is not in the right place, they won't learn anything."



Andiswa Damane with children at Bubble Bee Educare, Kayamandi.

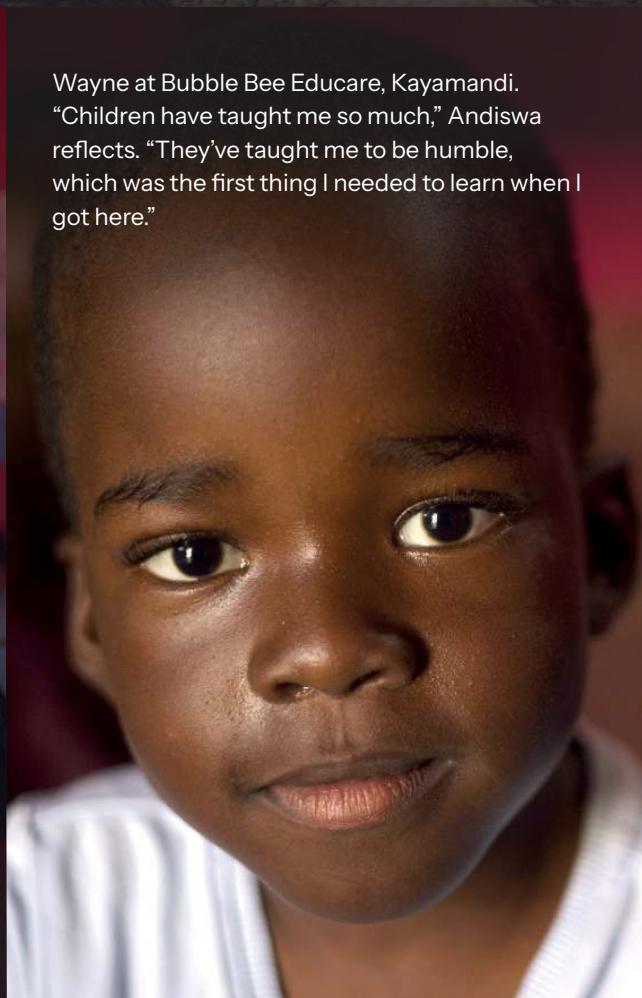


Children at Bubble Bee Educare, Kayamandi. In 2022, Andiswa's mother was able to create a classroom in the yard after receiving R40,000 from Stellenbosch Municipality's Grant-in-Aid, a programme that funds local community initiatives.



Andiswa Damane reads with children at Bubble Bee Educare, Kayamandi. Andiswa wants parents to see early learning centres not as somewhere children wait until "real school" begins, but as the beginning of education itself. She says every song, drawing and encounter with a book is laying a foundation for what follows.

Wayne at Bubble Bee Educare, Kayamandi. "Children have taught me so much," Andiswa reflects. "They've taught me to be humble, which was the first thing I needed to learn when I got here."



## BUBBLE BEE'S JOURNEY

2017

Andiswa's mother starts caring for children, initially offering overnight care to parents working late shifts.

2018

Bubble Bee Educare is officially established.

2024

Andiswa joins the centre full-time and completes ELRU training.

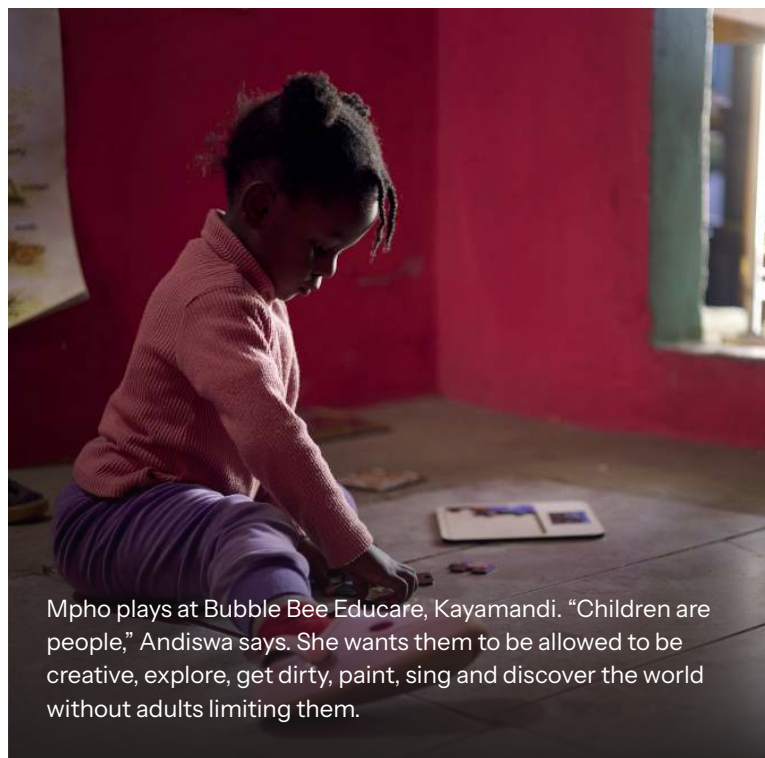
2025

Bronze registration approved.

2026

Silver registration application submitted. Social worker and EHP visits completed; Andiswa is now making the recommended improvements to the building, including repairs to the ceiling, a new window and storeroom upgrades.

When Andiswa started working at the centre full-time, she was apprehensive. Even though she had a matric and other qualifications, she had never trained to teach young children. Her mother introduced her to ELRU, a regional implementing partner for early learning social enterprise SmartStart in the Western and Southern Cape. The five-day training course helped her understand how to structure the day, respond to children and navigate the practical demands of running a centre.



Mpho plays at Bubble Bee Educare, Kayamandi. "Children are people," Andiswa says. She wants them to be allowed to be creative, explore, get dirty, paint, sing and discover the world without adults limiting them.

"SmartStart came into that whirlwind of not knowing and gave me a purpose," she says. "That's when I began to love working with children of every age. I can't stay with one class. I want all the classes, all the love and hugs."

Andiswa has big plans for Bubble Bee. The centre has applied for Silver registration with the Department of Basic Education, the level required before an early learning programme can apply for the government subsidy. She has also submitted the centre's building plans to upgrade the facility to the municipality.

*"I'm praying, working and researching day and night to identify anything that might stop the crèche from getting Silver registration. I'm going to get it."*

### WHAT'S NEXT?

Andiswa wants to enter 2027 with Bubble Bee's Silver registration approved and a separate class for the three- to five-year-olds. "I believe that if you put in the effort," she says, "the whole universe will work with you to make it possible."

Some former Bubble Bee children already return from primary school to show her their reports. Seeing how well they are doing makes her proud. But when Andiswa thinks about whether everything she is working so hard to build will matter, she looks much further ahead.

She pictures a child who started at Bubble Bee walking back through the gate years from now wearing a graduation gown. They have a degree, a diploma, perhaps a doctorate.

*"It could be 15 children," she says, "but even one child coming back to say, 'Mama, I made it,' would be marvellous."*

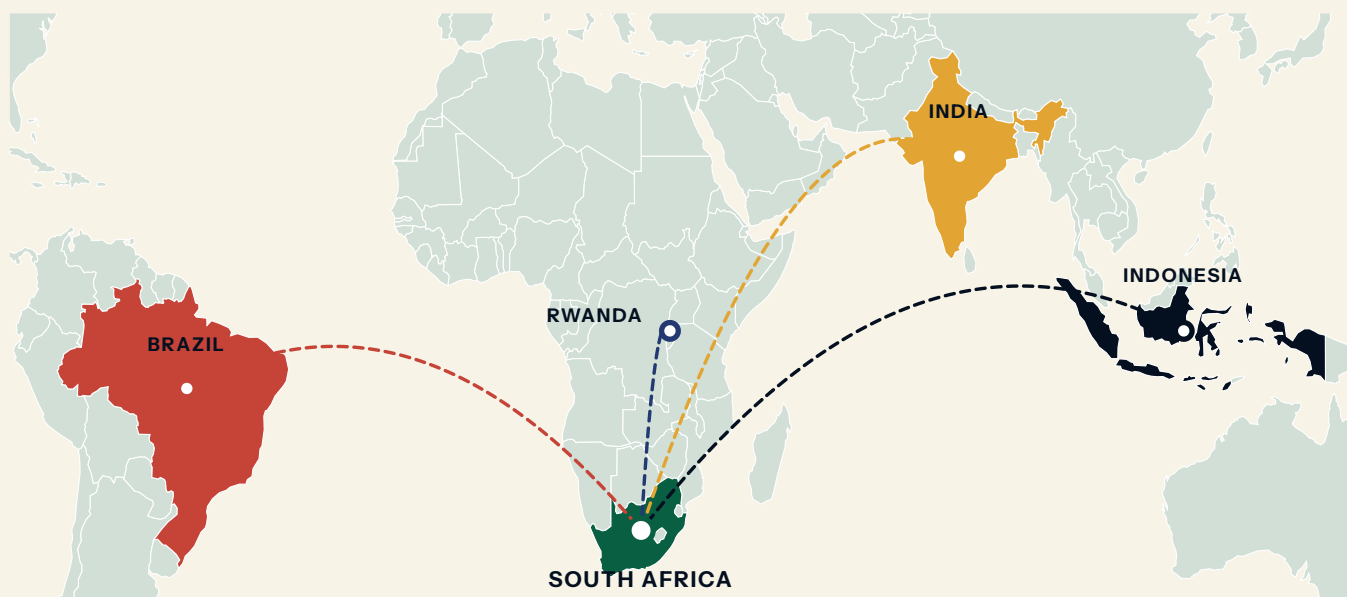
# From Neighbourhood *to Nation*

How we must learn together to bring quality early learning within reach of every child



BY SANJAY PUROHIT, CEO AND CHIEF CURATOR, CENTRE FOR EXPONENTIAL CHANGE

## CONNECTED BY A COMMON CHALLENGE



Map outline: Natural Earth.

*“Children continue to grow and develop rapidly every day. They cannot wait for us to get everything aligned. We must respond at scale, with speed, and sustain the change.”*

Sanjay Purohit



Children share a meal at an early learning centre in India, where the Bachpan Manao, Badhte Jao campaign brings more than 100 organisations together around early childhood. Photo: Bachpan Manao.

Every child growing up in a South African township, an Indian village or a Brazilian city, needs nurturing care, opportunities to play and the foundations for learning. Their needs are the same, while the network of people, services and resources around them may be very specific to their context. As our countries work towards strengthening such networks, children continue to grow and develop rapidly every day. They cannot wait for us to get everything aligned. We must respond at scale, with speed, and sustain the change.

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to spend time in South Africa, India, Brazil, Rwanda and Indonesia to better understand how access to, and quality of, early learning are being improved. Each country brings different experiences and approaches to a challenge that no one can solve alone. It is evident that the answers do not lie in finding a silver bullet that we can copy, but in learning from one another to develop responses suited to our contexts. It is about pushing the boundaries with new ideas.

An example from India illustrates how different actors in the ecosystem can collaborate around children. Bachpan Manao, Badhte Jao (Celebrate Childhood, Cheer Growth in Hindi) is a campaign celebrating the abundance of childhood for children aged 0–8. It brings together more than 100 civil society organisations, government and the private sector around a shared narrative and a commitment to collective action. The movement has been building rapidly, aligning key stakeholders around a shared effort to support children's development.

In Brazil, the State of Piauí launched a new National Identity Card (CIN) for newborn babies. This initiative records a child's biometric identity and connects it with their mother's identity in maternity hospitals. It aims to strengthen the child protection network,

ensure the delivery of healthcare services and, over time, effectively migrate all children into quality early learning programmes. By enabling an integrated development pathway for the child, it can serve as a model that may be adapted by other countries.

There are many more such social innovations that can be exchanged and leveraged through cooperation between countries of the Global South to expand access for children, act with the urgency their early years require and build improvements that last. To reach every child, we need to be unified in our purpose and yet embrace diversity of ideas without becoming uniform in our response. We have to strengthen the care and learning available today while creating a better system for tomorrow.

Meanwhile, many effective solutions have been deployed across South Africa's early learning landscape. The question is how to extend the benefits of these approaches to all those historically excluded in such a diverse country. South Africa's Bana Pele (Children First in Sesotho) initiative and its *Shared Blueprint to Achieve Universal Access to Quality Early Learning*, developed by the Department of Basic Education and partners across the sector, sets out a collective approach to expanding access to quality early learning.

Before the Blueprint was developed, I spent some time with organisations working on the ground including SmartStart, to understand how they build networks of local franchisees; Grow ECD, to see how they combine livelihoods with early learning; and Ilifa Labantwana, to understand how they have built their own coalition of partners. Each brought deep expertise, strong community relationships and varied approaches to supporting practitioners and parents, improving quality and extending access.

What stood out was that these organisations and institutions came together to shape the Blueprint



Children at a Pacto pelas Crianças event in Piauí, Brazil. Photo: Pacto pelas Crianças do Piauí.

“*Achieving scale is not simply a question of establishing more centres, it is about enabling many different networks of care to become stronger.*”

Sanjay Purohit

itself. Rather than developing a strategy and then inviting partners to implement it, South Africa drew on the experience and relationships already present in the sector. Bana Pele’s opportunity is to connect and strengthen those capabilities without requiring every organisation to set aside its expertise or follow a cookie-cutter approach. In practice, this begins with the network of care closest to each child: the parents, caregivers, early learning practitioners and partners who shape their earliest experiences.

For a child without access to an early learning programme, support may begin at home, by helping a parent or caregiver introduce more play, conversation and responsive care into everyday life. For another attending a small programme, it may mean connecting the daycare’s staff to training, learning materials or more experienced early learning providers. Community organisations and local government officials can strengthen these immediate relationships. Achieving scale is not simply a question of establishing more centres, it is about enabling many different networks of care to become stronger.

Making this possible requires what I believe is a “*beginner’s mind*”: recognising that none of us has all the answers, remaining curious about what others have learned and being willing to try new approaches. It means working across disciplines, organisations and communities, and bringing different people together

to solve problems rather than working in isolation. The same principle applies across borders, where different experiences can deepen our collective understanding of how to support young children.

The lesson is that reaching more children does not always require creating something entirely new. It can also mean making useful ideas and resources more widely available through existing systems. South Africa can draw on this experience while developing approaches suited to its own communities. Lasting change depends on whether early access and better-supported networks build the kind of momentum that grows into a genuine movement, with people at every level becoming problem-solvers in their own right, not simply recipients of a plan designed elsewhere. That ability to keep learning, adapting and acting as circumstances change is what makes progress sustainable.

Universal access to quality early learning is an ambition shared across developing countries in the Global South, but making it possible begins in homes, early learning centres and communities. We will not achieve it by finding one perfect model for every setting. We will achieve it by strengthening the people and relationships that support children and ensuring that what is learned in one place can benefit countless others. That is how change travels from neighbourhoods to nation.

*Sanjay Purohit is CEO and Chief Curator of the Centre for Exponential Change, which supports people and organisations working to address complex societal challenges at scale through shared knowledge, collaborative design, funding and mentoring.*



Community members at a workshop in Matatiele, Eastern Cape.



## ACTION 15 · CATALYSE COMMUNITY HUBS

# Local hands *make light work*

Delivering early learning at scale is not just a technical task, it is a community mission. In many areas, the strength of the local response determines whether children are reached, ELP providers are supported and services reflect the lived realities of families. That's why cultivating Community Hubs, locally rooted groups that foster care, accountability and collective action, is essential.

**I**n many communities, the people and organisations supporting young children are already there. It may be an early learning programme, a church, a local NGO, a municipal official, a parent group or a community leader. Each may be doing valuable work.

The problem is that they do not always know what the others are doing, and in communities facing so many crises, early learning can slip down the list of priorities.

For Monica Stach, CEO, Cotlands and Action 15 Lead, that is where a Bana Pele Community Hub begins.



*“The first realisation is often: we’ve never really sat around a table and thought through what we are doing within a community and for children,” she says.*

Community Hubs are not intended to create another standalone programme. Instead, Action 15 of the Shared Blueprint asks what could happen if existing

people, organisations and resources were better connected around the needs of young children.

The team started by talking to community collectives with deep roots in the places where children are. The

Anglican Board of Education for Southern Africa (ABESA) was among them, an organisation that

understands the communities it operates in and has long experience in building trust.



*“Before the workshop, I was focused primarily on what our church network could offer through its underutilised infrastructure: parish halls and other spaces that might be repurposed for early learning. What I discovered was something more foundational: the trust of communities. Our infrastructure matters, but it is this trust that gives those physical assets their deeper potential, and allows us to place our spaces, relationships and networks at the service of a shared vision.”*

Rev. Jaques Pretorius, Executive Director, ABESA

The conversation began with a simple question: where are the children, and what can we do to make sure all of them are in early learning? These collectives are

beginning to answer it, and that work has shaped the six steps below.



Participants at a Community Hubs prototyping workshop in Princess, Roodepoort.

The process starts from a deliberately different place: what is already good here?

Instead of beginning with problems, communities are asked to recognise the people, places, relationships and resources they already have. That shift can change the tone of the conversation.

“There’s this realisation that there’s so much good going on here,” Monica says.

From there, the group identifies what matters most, what greater coordination could make possible and what can begin immediately.

“People realise: nobody’s going to come and do this for us,” Monica says. “We need to use what we have to move stuff forward.”

The result is not a fixed model imposed from above, but a local team, a practical priority and a way to keep moving. The six-step journey is designed to help communities turn what they already have into collective action.

## SIX-STEP COMMUNITY HUB JOURNEY



### 1 APPRECIATE

Start with what is already working in the community.



### 2 TAKE STOCK

Use a simple baseline to understand where children and early learning stand today.



### 3 MAP THE ASSETS

Identify the people, places, organisations, relationships and resources already available.



### 4 IMAGINE THE HUB

Ask what greater coordination could make possible locally for early learning.



### 5 CHOOSE A PRIORITY

Identify a few practical actions and select one that can begin immediately.



### 6 FORM THE TEAM

Appoint local leaders, exchange details, create a task team and start.

Monica describes the work as one of the “most brave and uncertain” things she has done. Unlike a conventional project, where the activities and outcomes

are mapped in advance, the Community Hub approach is deliberately emergent.

*“It’s from grassroots levels,” she says. “There’s some magic that happens that’s not tangible when people come together and realise that they can put up their hand and do something meaningful and contribute.”*

In Ocean View in the Western Cape, that process has already begun to produce something concrete.

Registration emerged as a priority for the local group. Seven weeks after the initial engagement, community partners were preparing their first registration clinic, drawing on organisations and people already in the room rather than waiting for outside help to arrive.

Rotary, which seemed like an unlikely ECD partner but has long-standing relationships in communities across South Africa, played an important convening role, helping bring people together and secure a space. Participants also realised there was already a registered ECD programme in the community they could learn from. The point was not to bring in a solution from outside, but to organise what was already there.



*“Our greatest impact is not only measured by what we build for communities, but by what we empower them to build for themselves. When communities own the vision, shape the plan and lead the action, we do more than deliver projects; we nurture dignity, strengthen collective leadership and lay the foundations for generations of children to thrive.”*

Lungiswa Gwaai, Rotary Volunteer and Leader at LEAP Institute

## TIMELINE



Elsewhere, the value has been in bringing together organisations that had rarely worked with one another. In one community, seven different forums sat around the same table for the first time. Four have since begun moving forward together around activities linked to a potential hub.

The process is evolving as it goes.

Early workshops were dominated by organisational and community leaders. By the fourth, the team realised something important was missing: the voices of parents and practitioners. The approach was changed.

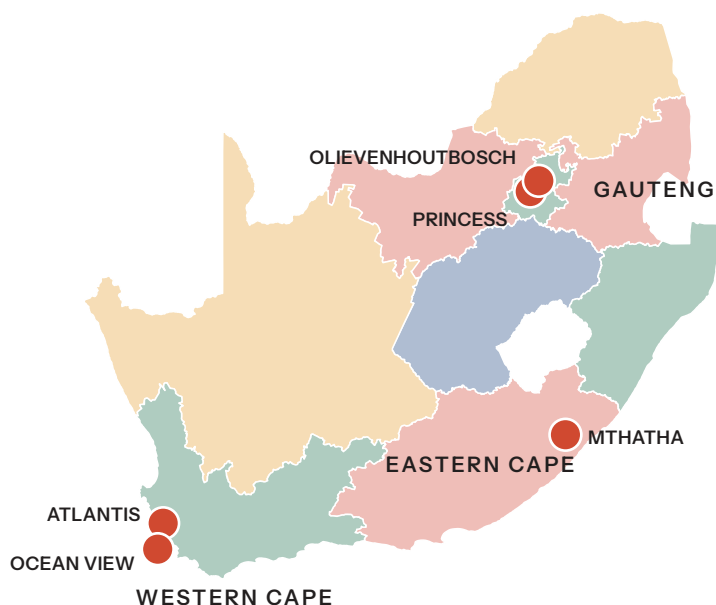
At a workshop in Princess in Gauteng, parents spoke about wanting to understand more about what actually

happens in early learning programmes: why children paint, why they build puzzles and why play matters. A father attending a parent-and-toddler group described how participating made him feel more included and more confident in raising his child.

For Monica, that kind of learning is part of the point. The hub is not something designed elsewhere and delivered into a community. It has to be shaped by the people who live there.

So far, five communities have been involved in the prototyping work: Atlantis and Ocean View in the Western Cape, Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, and Princess and Olievenhoutbosch in Gauteng.

## WHERE COMMUNITY HUBS ARE TAKING SHAPE



What ultimately makes a hub successful will not look identical in all five places. One may focus first on registration. Another may build stronger parent

support. Another may identify children who are not yet accessing early learning and find ways to connect them with services.

*“What excites me is the local ownership, just the agency and the ownership of this, wanting to do this for ourselves because ultimately we can benefit, but those around us also benefit.”*

### WHAT'S NEXT?

**Learn from the first hubs.** Five Community Hubs are currently being prototyped, giving the team a chance to see what works in very different local contexts.

**Train local champions.** The next phase will share early lessons and equip local hub champions to convene communities, map what already exists and turn shared priorities into action.

**Turn experience into a playbook.** What is learned through prototyping will inform a practical guide for

setting up Bana Pele Community Hubs, helping future communities adapt the approach rather than copy a fixed model.

**Grow the network.** The ambition is to build more local micro-networks that connect early learning programmes with families, grassroots leaders and community partners, while keeping the model flexible enough to reflect what each place already has.



Unathi takes part in an activity at Khethokuhle ELP in Umzumbe, Hibberdene, KwaZulu-Natal.

## COMMUNITY HUBS · EARLY PARTNERS

**Cotlands** South Africa's oldest and most adaptive children's organisation. Since 1936 it has re-invented itself from baby sanctuary and pioneering HIV and Aids hospice care, to its current role in play-based early learning.

**Rotary International** One of the world's largest service organisations, with 1.4 million members. They have active chapters in Southern Africa with a strong focus on community service.

**SACOFF / Mahlesedi Foundation** The South African Community of Faith-based Fraternals and Federations is a multi-faith network representing 252 members encompassing 26,538 places of worship nationwide. Their social impact focus is on food security, ECD, gender-based violence and disaster relief.

**ABESA** The Anglican Board of Education for Southern Africa is one of the largest church-school networks in the region. One of its strategic pillars is to galvanise parish and community involvement in education.

**Your organisation** Community Hubs are designed to grow through partnership. Your organisation can join the network and help spread locally led hubs across the country.



Gabriel Zima and his daughter  
at Kiddies Love Day Care in  
Motherwell, Gqeberha.



## ACTION 2 • INCLUSIVITY

# Leaving **no** *child behind*



In conversation with Wiedaad Slemming, Associate Professor and Director of the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town. She leads Action 2 of the Bana Pele Shared Blueprint, which aims to create services, policies and pathways that let every child participate meaningfully from the start.

**Q: When we talk about an inclusive early learning system, what should that look like for a child and a family?**

The word inclusion has come to mean different things to different people. In education, it is often associated first with disability, but it is much broader than that. It is about any child who experiences a barrier to learning.

And it's important to remember that inclusion starts from birth. It does not begin when a child enters school or even when they enter an early learning programme. That is why we have to think across health, education, social development and other services that shape a child's life from the very beginning.

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*“Participation is a precondition for inclusion, because if you’re participating, you’re also included.”*

**Q: You make an important distinction between a child being present in an early learning programme and genuinely participating. Why does that matter?**

Inclusion is not a new idea, but it hasn’t really shifted the needle for children in South Africa in a significant way. So we have been asking how to make inclusion real, and we are introducing the idea of participation.

A child can be present in a programme, taking part in activities and enjoying them with other children their age. That is one form of participation, but it is a very passive kind. What we hope for is children meaningfully engaging in activities and learning opportunities, with the caregivers in their lives involved too. That might be at home, in a playgroup or in a programme, wherever a child normally spends their day.

Participation is a precondition for inclusion, because if you’re participating, you’re also included. But if you only think about inclusion, you don’t get to that meaningful engagement, which is what we are really trying to achieve.

**Q: What are some of the areas we need to strengthen to make that possible?**

We need to think about the whole journey of a child. For very young children, the health system is often the first point of contact. That is where developmental concerns may first be identified, where referrals happen and where families begin accessing support. Later, the child may move into an early learning programme or into the education system.

The difficulty is often in those transitions. A child may be identified and referred, but then need an assessment. Those specialists are few and far between, and the waiting lists can be extremely long. When children move from one part of the system to another, continuity of support can break down. Children in that period are particularly vulnerable and can fall through the cracks.

**Q: Your work argues that inclusion needs to be built into the system, rather than added afterwards. What does that mean in practice?**

For a long time, we have been stuck in a cycle of wanting to retrofit or add on. I have been involved in developing different policies, including the National Integrated ECD Policy, and the pattern is often the same. A policy is developed, and then someone realises that children with disabilities haven’t been mentioned, so those words are added to make sure all children are covered.

That is not enough. If you are building universal policies, you’ve got to start with the children who are the most vulnerable and the most at risk of being marginalised. If you are creating and developing with that in mind, nobody will get excluded.

Inclusion cannot sit alongside the system as a separate programme or intervention. It has to be built into the way policy, leadership, data, funding, workforce and local delivery are designed. We call these the six levers for strengthening the ECD system.

---

*“You’ve got to start with the children who are the most vulnerable and the most at risk of being marginalised.”*

**Q: How do the six levers work together to make inclusion possible?**

Those levers were developed to strengthen the ECD system as a whole, and all of them are equally important for inclusion.

Start with policy. We need to fill some gaps and do some fine-tuning, but policy is not necessarily our biggest challenge. It is about how we make these policies real. That is where leadership and coordination come in. This work already sits in multiple places in the system, and the task is to bring it together more cohesively, so that people are not doing similar things in parallel

without really working together. Funding matters too: if you fund only at the basic level, your funding models do not account for the additional support some children need.

We also have to avoid being overwhelmed by the scale of what is needed. This is an incremental process, and we build towards it. That is why the focus on participation and on the individual child matters so much. Even without extra practitioners, you problem-solve to see how it can work for that child and that family.

## SIX LEVERS FOR STRENGTHENING THE ECD SYSTEM



**Policies** provide a clear vision and mandate for different sectors and spheres of government



Strong **leadership** coordinates action at national, provincial and local level



Good quality **data** enable population-based planning and guide quality



Adequate and sustainable public **funding** improves quality and access to ECD services



The ECD **workforce** is equipped to support pregnant women, young children and families



Effective local **delivery systems** ensure children receive the right support, at the right time

Source: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town

### Q: Who needs to be part of shaping that system?

We tend to speak to the same people: the people we know and the people who are already part of these conversations. We have tried to be intentional about bringing in other voices, including people with lived experience and people working in different parts of the system who ordinarily would not make it into boardroom conversations. For our initial engagements, we have invited mothers and caregivers, people already working in ECD environments and people from different parts of the health system.

That matters because, however universal the principles and approaches, what we are ultimately trying to influence is an individual child's journey and the life of that child's family. The voices of the people living it every day need to be part of the conversation.

### Q: The first stakeholder engagement takes place at the Bana Pele Leadership Summit. What are you hoping to get from it?

The work is already under way, and this is the first time we are engaging people outside our core team. Many people are not yet aware of the Bana Pele process, so part of this is introducing what we are trying to do. But we also want peer review from people with rich experience and expertise of their own. Are we approaching this the right way? Who are we leaving out?

One of the tools we want to use is journey mapping, following the journey of a child with additional support needs through health, education and other systems. At the end of the day, it's one child and family that needs to be living this journey through multiple systems at the same time. So how can we think about that together?

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Over the coming year, the team will map South Africa's existing system, review policy and evidence, draw on international learning and engage stakeholders to set priorities. The work will help shape practical guidance on early identification, adaptive learning and referral and care pathways.



Lunga at Kiddies Love Day Care in Motherwell, Gqeberha.



# Listening for a *Shared Story*

Bana Pele is not starting with a message and asking communities to repeat it. The Blueprint calls for a narrative co-created with families, providers, partners and community leaders, grounded in listening and shaped by the real voices of those involved. So we began by listening: to parents, practitioners and grandparents in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, and to children. People said what they already believe about care, learning, respect and what young children need to thrive. What came back was not one neat answer, but shared truths, tensions and possibilities.

The same ideas kept coming up: love, attention, trust, safety, play, belonging and the freedom to speak. So did a tension about how adults hear children who question, correct or speak confidently. The point is not to smooth it away. It is to understand it.



*“We are not inventing a new story, we are making it visible and putting the child at the centre of it. To do that, we have to listen first to the people already living that story.”*

Uvania Naidoo, Department of Basic Education and Action 9 Lead



*“I am little, but I have good ideas too.”*

BRYCE



*“When I cry, I don’t want shouting, I want a hug.”*

RYANNA

## The Bigger Shift

The Shared Blueprint calls for more than greater awareness of early learning. It asks South Africa to see children, practitioners and early learning itself differently.

### FROM PASSIVE TO POWERFUL

Children are not simply recipients of care, but active participants in their own development.

### FROM FRAGMENTED TO FOUNDATIONAL

Early learning programmes are vital community institutions and part of a shared public mission.

*Changing perception takes more than a communications campaign. It takes stories people recognise, trust and want to carry themselves.*

### FROM CARE TO CATALYST

Early learning is more than a welfare service. It is an investment in social and economic development.

### FROM SYMPATHY TO POTENTIAL

Practitioners are skilled professionals, entrepreneurs and nation-builders, not charity workers.

*"Grown ups say children are very nosy and are always full of news and stories."*

NOTHANDO

## What we are hearing

Across the conversations, hundreds of individual experiences begin to converge around five ideas about what young children need to thrive. They are not campaign messages imposed from above, but a synthesis of what children, parents, grandparents and practitioners are already telling us: that children need to be **seen, heard, trusted as learners, held by a community and rooted in a place of their own.**

Listening is not only about finding the right words. It is also how a movement grows from the ground up, by building trust, creating resonance and giving people a story they can recognise as their own.

These five insights turn those voices into a shared narrative, without losing the people behind them.

### INSIGHT 1

## Our children are seen

*A child's first experience of care is knowing that someone is paying attention.*



*"I like when mommy plays with me and doesn't look at her phone."*

OMIYO



*"Try to give your children as much time as possible, make sure you're always present with your child."*

FATHER, GAUTENG



*"A parent's contribution comes down to whether they have time for their child, rather than pushing phones, TV and the internet on them."*

BONGEKILE JAKO, KIDDIES LOVE DAY CARE, MOTHERWELL



*"When you hug them and they hug you back, you can see their self-confidence, and that's the first thing I notice, when they run to you."*

LUNGILE NKABINDE, LAWLEY

## INSIGHT 2

# Our children are heard

*When children know they will be listened to, they learn that their thoughts, questions and feelings matter.*



*"When I talk and people really listen, it makes me feel happy."*

MBALENHLE



*"The rule here is that when a grown-up walks in, the kids move away from the living room out of respect for the adults. Children don't talk back."*

FATHER, GAUTENG



*"Sometimes I don't ask for help because I think adults are busy."*

IVHANANNE



*"Sometimes, because children these days talk back... it sits uncomfortably with you. But then you realise this is how they've been taught to speak up for themselves, so they can be understood."*

PARTICIPANT, EASTERN CAPE



*"Now, as a grandparent, I realise I need to be a lot more mindful in how I speak... because I'm speaking to an actual, self-aware young person."*

GRANDPARENT, EASTERN CAPE

## INSIGHT 3

# Our children are born learners

*Children are learning long before anyone calls it a lesson: through play, trying, watching, asking and doing things for themselves.*



*"If I make a mistake, I can try again and learn."*

MUSAWENKOSI



*"Sometimes I know how to do it, I just need a little time."*

MENKA



*"My child said, Mama, remember sharing is caring."*

MOTHER, GAUTENG



*"I can put on my shoes by myself, sometimes people don't let me try."*

OFFRAEL



*"He comes home and teaches me too."*

MOTHER, GAUTENG

## INSIGHT 4

# Our children are raised by a village

*A child's world is held by many people: parents, grandparents, teachers, neighbours and others who notice, care and step in.*



*"Playing with my granny is my favourite because she laughs with me."*

DAISE



*"Some days, when I need help, the gentleman who lives in the shack across the way also helps me."*

DINEO MULAUDZI, CHRIS HANI  
INFORMAL SETTLEMENT, GAUTENG



*"I use my old-age grant money to make sure there's food on the table."*

GRANDFATHER, GAUTENG



*"We still need a setup where a child is surrounded by people, not surrounded by money, full stop."*

GRANDPARENT, EASTERN CAPE

## INSIGHT 5

# Our children have a place of their own

*An early learning centre can be more than somewhere a child spends the day. It can be a safe, familiar place for the child and a doorway to support for the whole family.*



*"A child who goes to creche seems to learn quicker and is less shy... My child is confident!"*

SMANGELE JWANA,  
MOTHER, LAWLEY



*"Most parents don't actually know there are other services available beyond [the centre] itself... They usually find out about these through the crèche."*

PARTICIPANT, EASTERN CAPE



*"Love is important, and not just from a parent. When they come to the creche, they are loved by the teachers..."*

SANELISIWE NYATHI, KHETHOKUHLE  
DAY CARE, UMZUMBE

# Where we listened

- 1

**Eastern Cape**  
Mdantsane, New Brighton, Motherwell, Duncan Village, Kabega Park, Walmer, Zwelitsha
- 2

**KwaZulu-Natal**  
Umlazi, KwaMakhutha, Umzinto, uMzumbe, Gamalakhe, Kokstad, Highflats
- 3

**Gauteng**  
Lawley, Lawley Kokotela, Kliptown, Chris Hani informal settlement

## What South Africans are already saying online

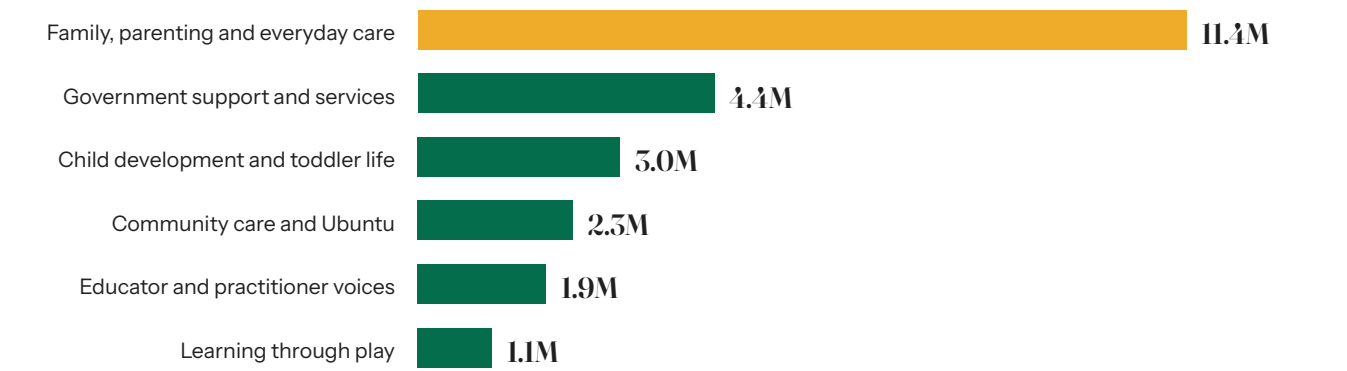
The listening sessions are not happening in isolation. A TikTok narrative audit found that the strongest early learning content is already coming from parents, practitioners, Gogos, fathers and community organisations rather than institutions.

### TIKTOK, JANUARY TO JULY 2026



### TIKTOK IMPRESSIONS BY THEME

Impressions, in millions · South Africa · 1 January to 31 July 2026



Source: Bana Pele TikTok Narrative Audit by Boniswa Sidwaba, Culture, Digital and Brand Transformation Strategist, 1 January to 31 July 2026 (Synclly social listening)

A listening session with Dineo Mulaudzi in Chris Hani informal settlement, Kliptown, Gauteng.



A participant at a workshop in Matatiele, Eastern Cape.



*“South Africans are already framing childhood through love, pride, resilience and Ubuntu; they don’t need convincing that childhood matters. But those conversations lack a shared anchor. Bana Pele can help connect and anchor them.”*

Boniswa Sidwaba, Culture, Digital and Brand Transformation Strategist

## WHAT’S NEXT?

**Keep listening.** Bring more parents, practitioners, children and community voices into the conversation.

**Test the emerging themes.** Use trusted creators and community storytellers to explore ideas such as children being seen, heard and recognised as born learners.

**Amplify what is already resonating.** The next step is Action 10: commissioning creative agencies to

help share and reinforce the emerging narrative. The TikTok audit offers a clear starting point. Family care, everyday learning and Ubuntu are the strongest themes, while authentic community-led content consistently outperforms institutional messaging.

**Turn listening into participation.** Create more opportunities for South Africans to add their own stories, experiences and reflections to the shared narrative.

## THE PEOPLE WHO MANAGED THE LISTENING CAMPAIGN

Solutions Insights Lab: Miranda Pursley · Khwezi Magwaza · Ambika Samarthya-Howard  
Catherine Muller, independent filmmaker  
Uvania Naidoo, Department of Basic Education  
Boniswa Sidwaba, Culture, Digital and Brand Transformation Strategist  
Siven Maslamoney, Bana Pele Secretariat



# 52 Districts and Metros. *One Shared Task.*

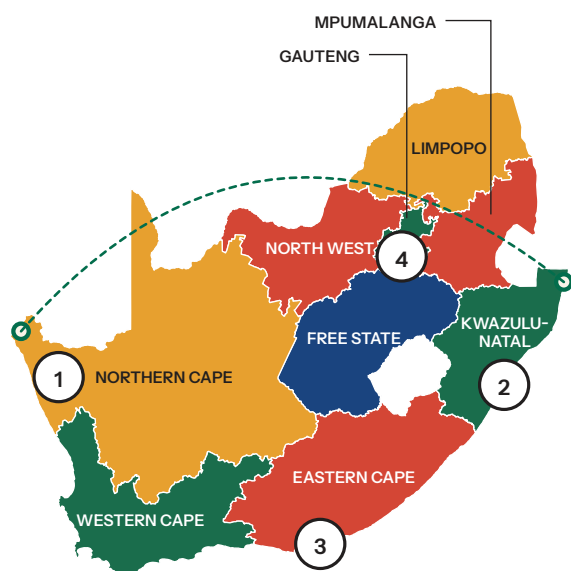
Silver registration unlocks government subsidy support for early learning programmes. In 2026, Bana Pele worked across all nine provinces to strengthen local government's role in helping more centres reach it.

**F**or early learning centres to climb the registration ladder, they will need two visits: one from a social worker, who helps programmes enter the system and improve over time, and one from an Environmental Health Practitioner (EHP), who enforces health and safety requirements. The two professions fall under different tiers of government, and in many districts they had never worked together. So, the campaign began with their managers, then brought both sides together face to face.

But this is bigger than getting two professionals to talk to each other. Provincial and local government

operate under different mandates, and early learning programmes often have to navigate both. In poorer communities, that can mean confronting difficult questions of zoning, land use, infrastructure, health and safety before a centre can move forward. Blueprint Action 3 starts from a simple premise: if provincial education departments and municipalities build stronger working relationships, they can solve more of these problems together and give ELPs a clearer, more supportive route through the system.

## A NATIONAL LOCAL-GOVERNMENT NETWORK



Map: geoBoundaries (CC BY 4.0).

## BY THE NUMBERS

257

MUNICIPALITIES REACHED  
THROUGH DISTRICT AND  
METRO ENGAGEMENT

52

DISTRICT AND METRO  
STRUCTURES ENGAGED  
44 DISTRICTS + 8 METROS

9

PROVINCES

47

ONBOARDING WORKSHOPS

~1,700

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH  
PRACTITIONERS NATIONALLY

75%+

ATTENDANCE AT  
MOST WORKSHOPS

**1** Namakwa, Northern Cape  
EHPs visit centres monthly and know the social workers by name.

**2** eThekwin, KwaZulu-Natal  
Inspections start with the hazards that matter most to children.

**3** Nelson Mandela Bay, Eastern Cape  
A fast-track consent process, without costly re-zoning.

**4** Midvaal, Gauteng  
Inspection reports became guidance for operators.



The workshops held between April and June 2026 engaged all 44 district municipalities and eight metros across all nine provinces. Through these district and metro structures, the campaign reached South Africa's full network of 257 municipalities.



## What changed when people met?

In the room, an EHP and a social worker found they wanted the same thing. The workshops gave both sides a shared language: protecting children does not have

to mean treating every shortcoming as pass or fail. Risks can be identified, improvements required and programmes supported to progress.



*“This is where we found each other,” says Zanele Mochechela of the Department of Basic Education.*

The shift was small and powerful. A compliance notice already tells a centre what to fix, but the registration system cannot upload a notice. It needs the same findings in a report. Many EHPs were already working developmentally without calling it that.

In workshop after workshop, EHPs and social workers agreed to share lists, set up WhatsApp groups,

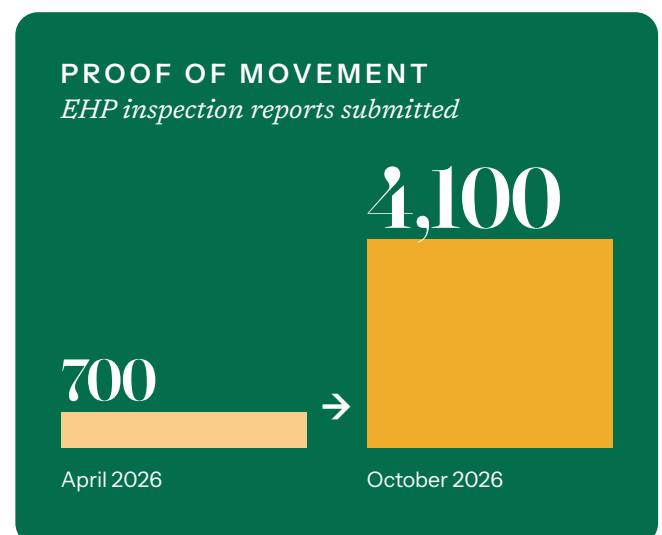
meet regularly and coordinate visits. In some areas, EHPs have started notifying social workers as soon as an inspection report has been completed so that the next registration step can follow. The effect was visible quickly. In just two months, the number of EHP inspection reports in the system rose from around 700 to over 2,400.

*“The facilitator tasked colleagues to work together and avoid statuses because the objective is for the children.”*

Participant, onboarding workshop evaluation

### TIMELINE

- NOV 2025**  
Inter-Ministerial Committee backs an ECD Local Government Campaign.
- FEB–MAR 2026**  
Provincial and district Environmental Health Managers onboarded.
- APR–JUN 2026**  
47 face-to-face EHP and Social Worker workshops across the country.
- AUG 2026**  
Revised National Environmental Health Norms and Standards published.



## WORKING APART / WORKING TOGETHER

### WORKING *APART*

-  EHPs and Social Workers often working separately
-  Different interpretations of requirements
-  Information and lists not always shared
-  Registration steps getting stuck

### WORKING *TOGETHER*

-  Shared local plans
-  WhatsApp groups and regular meetings
-  ECD visit lists shared
-  Joint or coordinated site visits
-  Inspection reports feeding into the next registration step



The onboarding report identifies the collaboration between EHPs and Social Workers as one of the strongest outcomes of the programme.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Monthly data sharing and quarterly municipal engagements are now continuing, while a national working group is being formed to tackle barriers such as zoning, land use and coordination that cannot be solved by individual officials alone.

## THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE WORK

Bringing social workers and environmental health practitioners into the same room, in all nine provinces, took many hands. Our thanks to everyone below, and to the municipal managers and environmental health managers who championed it.

### ACTION LEADS

Zanele Mochechela, Department of Basic Education and Tebogo Chake, Bana Pele PMU with Roshene Singh, Bana Pele Secretariat

### GOVERNMENT PARTNERS

**SALGA:** Nozibele Makanda, Sikhetho Mavundza, Dr Thabo Sepuru, Mandu Mallane

**COGTA:** Ashley Losch, Bakhetsile Mangena

**National Department of Health:** Daniel Nkuna, Khumbudzo Boozi, Penelope Mahalefa

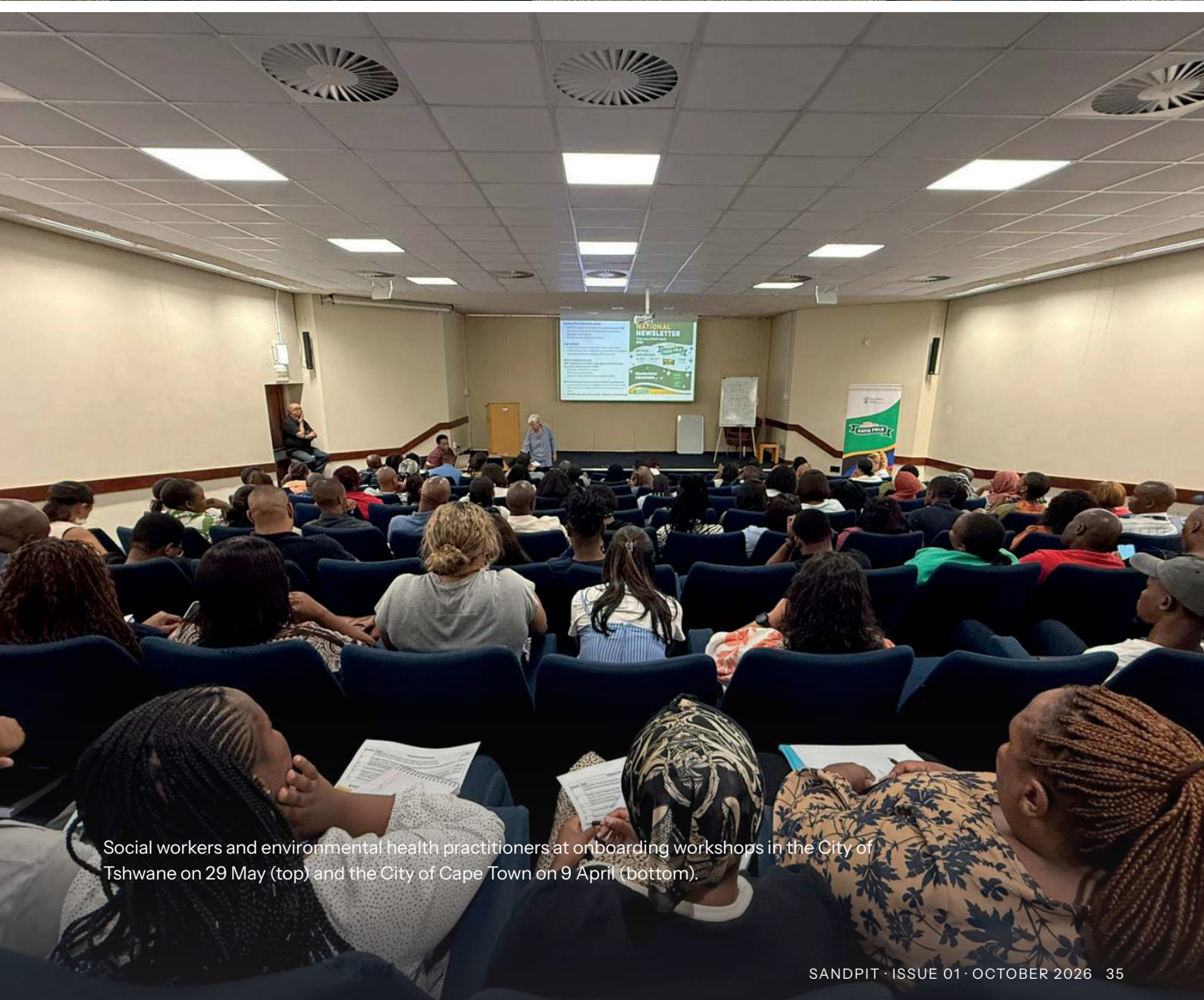
### FACILITATORS

**Education and Training Unit:** Bandile Sizani, Beatie Hofmeyr, Bontle Barends, Ravin Singh

### Bana Pele Project Management Unit:

Ivy Rapoo, Mpho Papale, Sithembile Dube, Simone van Willingham, Tammy Chetty, Pholisiwe Mbona, Noxolo Sibiya

*Built on earlier groundwork led by Nobayeni Dladla and others who strengthened municipal engagement on early learning.*



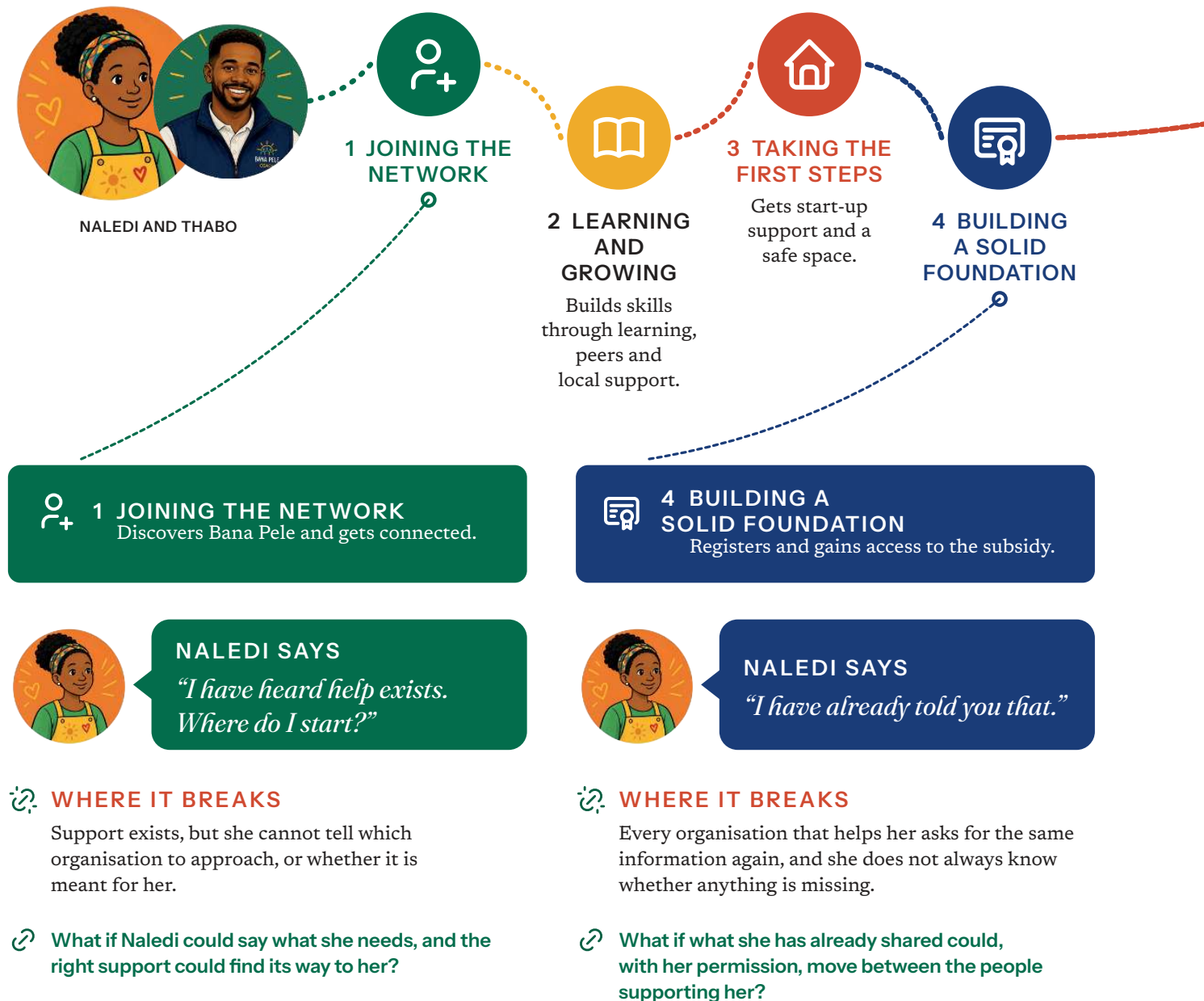
Social workers and environmental health practitioners at onboarding workshops in the City of Tshwane on 29 May (top) and the City of Cape Town on 9 April (bottom).



# A More Connected Journey

In a system as vast and diverse as South Africa's, technology can be a powerful enabler, helping ELP providers feel less isolated, more connected and better supported in their daily practice. With the right design, digital tools can bring learning, guidance and real-time support closer to where care and teaching happen in classrooms, homes and centres across the country.

## NALEDI'S JOURNEY



Meet Naledi. She runs a home-based early learning programme in her community, and wants to keep learning, build a sustainable centre and give every child in her care the best possible start. Beside her is Thabo, who represents the person who supports her, such as a social worker, EHP, community health worker, coach or mentor. Between them

runs her journey, and right now it is hard to travel without help.

## THERE IS NO SINGLE NALEDI

Some practitioners are supported by an NGO. Some are completely independent. Some get help from several organisations, but only now and then. Where she lives and how well she is connected change what support looks like.



*“The Digital Backbone is a way for a practitioner to be connected, see other practitioners and be visible to the support that they need to thrive in their journey.”*

Lazola Makhupula, Bana Pele Action 13 Lead





Participants at the Digital Backbone workshop, Johannesburg, 2-3 September 2026.



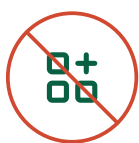
## THINK OF THE DIGITAL BACKBONE LIKE AN ELECTRICITY GRID



*“It works quietly in the background, and someone has to power, manage and govern it. The organisations and tools that support a practitioner are the appliances. One might be the air fryer and another something else; they all run on the same energy, and they are not the same thing. The grid would not replace them. It would let them work together.”*

Lyndsey Petro, Head of Partnerships, Grow ECD

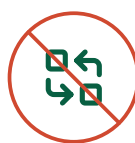
## WHAT THE BACKBONE IS NOT



one new super-app



one giant  
central database



a replacement for  
existing platforms



a finished system

## WHERE IT STANDS

- **DEFINED** A shared concept of what the Backbone is, and what it is not.
- **LISTENED** A two-day workshop in Johannesburg with practitioners, NGOs, church representatives and funders.
- **IMAGINING** Three early use cases: organisations coordinating support without overlap, Naledi finding the right Thabo, and Thabo supporting Naledi with her permission.
- **NEXT** Workshop at Bana Pele Leaders Summit invites the wider ecosystem to shape it.



*“The journey becomes important. Where they consume the digital information is not necessarily very important.”*

Vijay Puttaraju, Head of Solutions, Tibil Solutions and Action 13 Lead

## WHERE THE JOURNEY GETS STUCK

*Friction points raised by practitioners at the Johannesburg workshop*



### DAILY SURVIVAL

Food, fees and learning all need attention



### GETTING CONNECTED

I need someone to help me get started



### TRUSTED SUPPORT

Who can I trust?  
Who understands my needs?



### PAPERWORK AND WAITING

The same documents.  
Still waiting for funding.



### MEETING REQUIREMENTS

What must I improve, and who can help?

## WHAT'S NEXT?

After ecosystem consultation, co-design and buy-in sessions, the next step is to finalise a prototype for a contained pilot with early adopters. The pilot will be used to generate early results and practical lessons, which can then inform further development and refinement towards a Phase 1 model suited to the South African context.

## DESIGNED TOGETHER



*“I learned a lot about the dynamics between a practitioner and supporter. I learned that I can get more skills from social media without waiting for a coach to come and help me.”*

Wendy Mtepele, Hope ECD



*“People left work just to come and sit and meet and find a way forward amongst all the problems, and to see that people really care about the [early learning] practitioners.”*

Noxolo Gqada, Strategic Design and Integration Lead, DG Murray Trust



*“It was lovely to be reminded of the amazing assets we have in this country.”*

Sarah McGuigan, Executive Director, Ntataise

Participants at the Digital Backbone workshop, Johannesburg, 2–3 September 2026.



# Making the Money Work Together

South Africa is already investing in early learning. But the investments are fragmented and don't work together for common goals. Funding orchestration asks how those different sources can work together to reach every child.

Parents, philanthropy and the state are the biggest funders of early learning. Recently government has put serious money behind universal access to quality early learning, with NGOs and private funders investing alongside it. But a bigger subsidy allocation will not, on its own, reach every child. It only reaches programmes registered at Silver or Gold, and many of the costs of getting there fall between budgets: fixing toilets and kitchens, completing the paperwork and

keeping going until the first payment arrives. The risk is that public money goes unspent while children wait.

Funding orchestration looks across that whole landscape, helping different sources of capital reinforce one another and identifying where additional, flexible funding could remove the bottlenecks holding progress back. It does not tell funders what to support or redirect existing funding. Nobody is told what to fund, and nothing that already exists is pooled or redirected.



*“Organisations are coming to the table and they’re really willing to collaborate and start thinking about this collectively.”*

Jesal Kika-Mistry, Bana Pele Secretariat and Action 8 Lead

## BY THE NUMBERS

**R12.8bn**

ADDITIONAL PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN THE ECD SUBSIDY OVER THREE YEARS

**R3.4bn → R9.1bn**

PROJECTED INCREASE IN TOTAL SUBSIDY FUNDING FROM 2024/25 TO 2027/28

**~1.3 million**

CHILDREN THE SUBSIDY COULD SUPPORT BY 2027/28

**115,000**

ADDITIONAL CHILDREN THE ECCE OUTCOMES FUND AIMS TO REACH

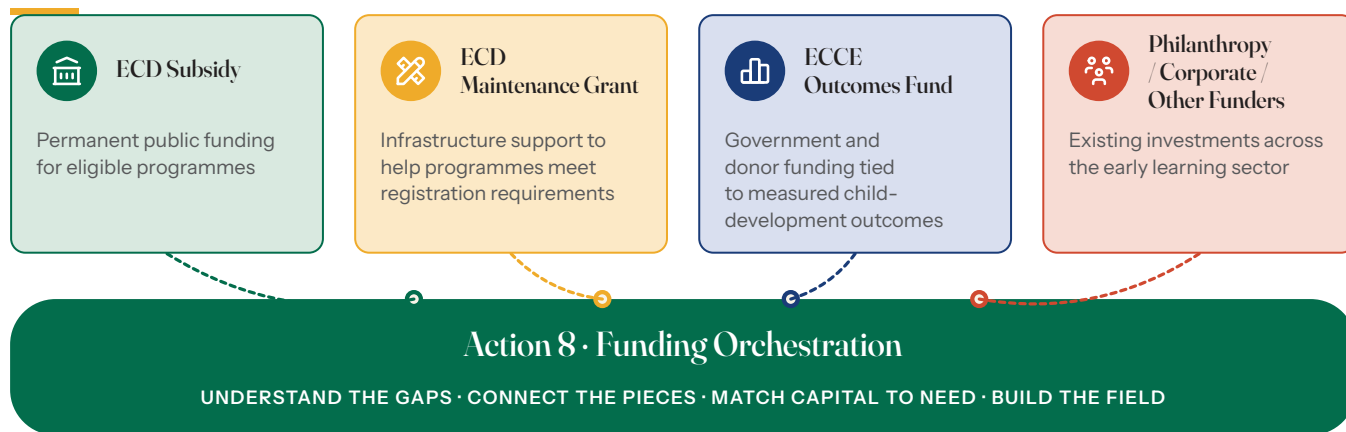
**R17 → R24**

INCREASE IN THE DAILY PER-CHILD SUBSIDY

**R496m**

ECCE OUTCOMES FUND OVER THREE YEARS

## Existing Funding



## Emerging Blueprint Funding Actions



Funding orchestration is the connective tissue that runs through every source of money for early learning, existing and new. It connects the subsidy, grants, outcomes funding, philanthropy, corporate investment and the Blueprint's new funding actions to each other and to the wider funding landscape, so they work as one system rather than as separate streams.

## What does orchestration *actually* do?

### 1 UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM

Build a shared picture of where the gaps, costs and bottlenecks are.

### 2 SHAPE HOW THE PIECES FIT

Help different funding sources and financial tools reinforce one another.

### 3 MOBILISE & MATCH

Connect the right capital with the right need at the right time.

### 4 BUILD THE FIELD

Create a more connected community of funders around a shared agenda.

### FUNDING FOLLOWS FUNCTION.

Early learning has been funded funder by funder, project by project. Bana Pele starts from what success looks like at scale. Large, steady funding flows are one of the last things to achieve, not the first.



*“Orchestration is a form of facilitative leadership. It’s not command and control.”*

Jordan Fabyanske, CEO, Integral

### WHAT’S NEXT?

Identify the priorities where additional funding is most needed.

Build a shared national picture of the gaps and bottlenecks.

Cost the priorities to understand what each will require.

Match funding to needs, working with their existing mandates and constraints.

## FUNDING ORCHESTRATION TEAM

### Action 8 Lead

Jesal Kika-Mistry ·  
Bana Pele Secretariat

### Funding cluster

Grace Leach · Zaheera Mohammed (Action 5: Subsidy Innovations)  
Julia de Bruyn · Roshene Singh · Nomsa Muthaphuli · Janeli Kotzé · Siven Maslamoney (Action 6: Bana Pele Catalyst Fund)  
Lerato Shai (Action 7: Livelihoods Funding)

### Technical support

Integral: Jordan Fabyanske · Sandy Majola · Nadir Shams · Diana Duran



Practitioner Zoleka Mkhize with a child at Kiddies Love Day Care in Motherwell, Gqeberha.

Lihle has breakfast at Kiddies Love Day Care in Motherwell, Gqeberha.



GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING  
· ECARES CASE STUDY



basic education  
Department of  
Basic Education  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



# Built to *Enable*

Not long ago, registering an early learning programme meant paper files and repeat journeys, and government could not see the sector it served. One national system is changing how programmes come in, how officials support them and what government knows.

“**T**he administration was a headache of compiling the documents and then you have to travel to go hand in the documents... and then they tell you there are a few papers missing, so now you have to travel back.” That was registration for Leroy Matroos, principal of Little Angels Daycare, which his mother founded in 1998. Today his programme is registered at Silver, online.

Behind that routine was a deeper problem. When early learning moved to the Department of Basic Education in April 2022, “there was no credible system”,

says Bheki Mpanza, a Chief Director at the Department. A census counted 42,420 programmes, but fewer than half were registered and only a third received the subsidy.

The answer was to open the door and build the system at the same time. A simplified “New Bronze” registration lets a programme in with the essentials, and a national system, eCares, was built to run it. Rather than pilot it in a few districts, the Department went national from the start, launching in June 2024 alongside the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive.



*“The science has been our determined and consistent approach of working every problem from the perspectives of people, processes and technology. The art is taking every opportunity available and riding the wave.”*

Colin Almeleh, Director of Knowledge, Information and Data Systems, Ilifa Labantwana

## BY THE NUMBERS

42% → 92%

OF KNOWN PROGRAMMES REGISTERED AT SOME LEVEL, FROM THE 2021 CENSUS TO SEPTEMBER 2026

39,621

TOTAL NUMBER OF REGISTERED PROGRAMMES AS OF SEPTEMBER 2026

1.6 million

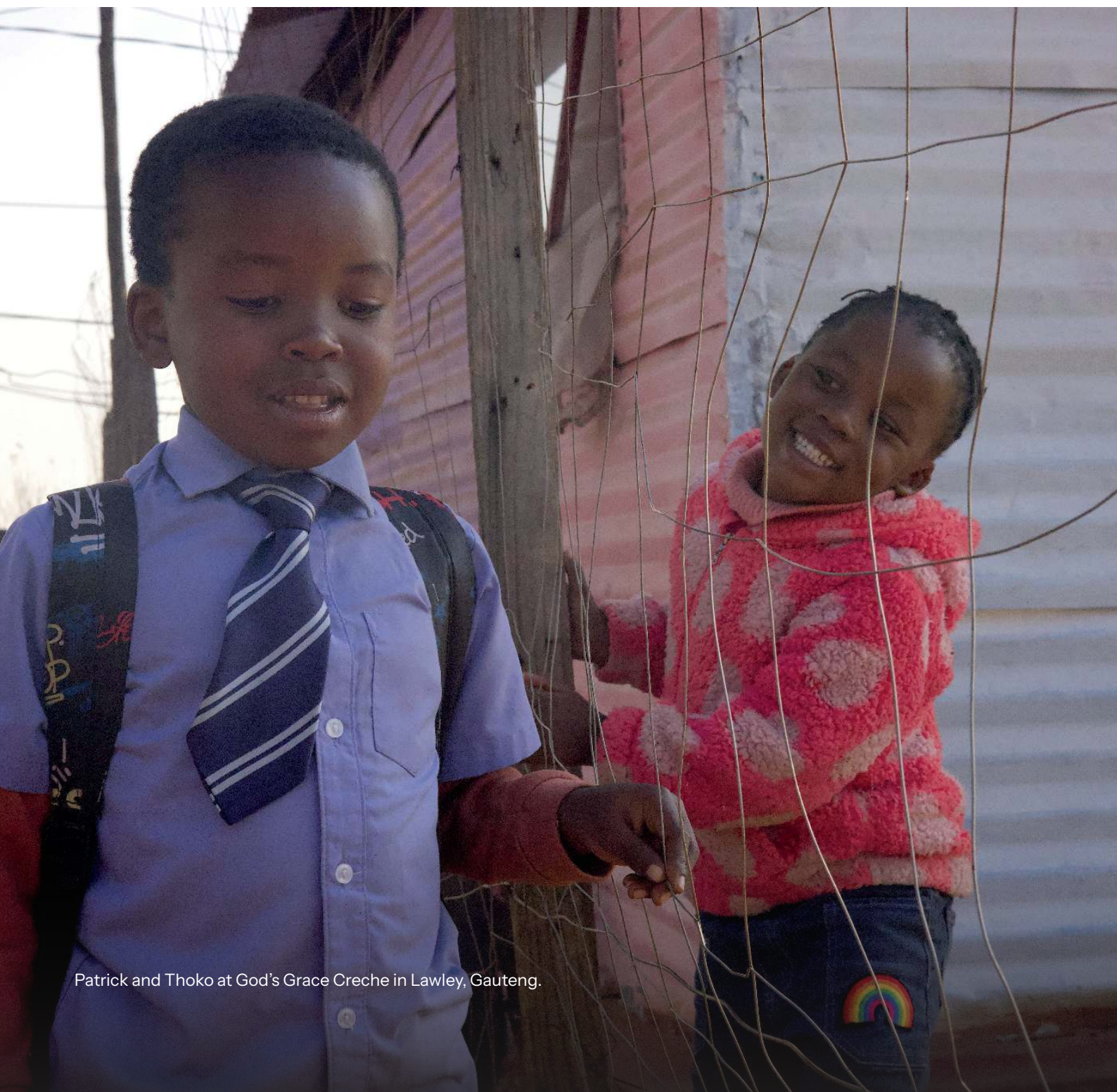
CHILDREN NOW VISIBLE TO GOVERNMENT IN REGISTERED PROGRAMMES

23,847

SILVER AND GOLD COMBINED (LEVEL REQUIRED TO ACCESS SUBSIDY)

748,110 → 954,700

CHILDREN BENEFITING FROM THE SUBSIDY, 2024 TO SEPTEMBER 2026



Patrick and Thoko at God's Grace Creche in Lawley, Gauteng.

# When the system can see, *it can support*

For Nonhlanhla Hlatshwayo, a Gauteng social worker who reviews applications on eCares, the change is more than paperwork. “We used to carry around files that were breaking our backs,” she says. Now everything is online, and programmes that were hard to find are on the system.

Districts see it too. Tebogo Chake of the Project Management Unit says they can watch the impact of their work on a live dashboard “for the first time”. That

matters because “registration is not an end in itself”, he says. “It’s about ensuring that ELPs qualify for government subsidy.”

The picture of the sector that the campaign and eCares built helped make the case for a R10 billion increase in the early learning budget, announced in February 2025. Since then, more than 200,000 additional children are benefiting from the subsidy.



*“They know that we are not just coming to monitor them, but we are coming to assist them. I can do my planning, because they are already on the system.”*

Nonhlanhla Hlatshwayo, ECD Social Worker: Gauteng Department of Education

## THE CLIMB IS SPEEDING UP

Early June: 458 approvals · 2 September: 900 · 30 September: 1,343

Daily approvals: 10–15 in early September, 25–30 by the end of the month. The target every province has committed to is one per district per day, about 50. September alone added roughly as many Silver and Gold approvals as the three months before it.

## TIMELINE

- 2014**  
Department of Social Development (DSD) conducts an ECD audit of 19,000 ELPs.
- 2015–2019**  
Ilifa lays groundwork with DSD to improve data systems.
- 2019**  
President Ramaphosa announces shift of ECD function to the Department of Basic Education (DBE).
- 2020**  
DSD and partners launch Vangasali campaign to support unregistered ELPs to comply.
- 2021**  
DBE commissions national census of ELPs and the first national assessment of preschool children (Thrive by Five). Records 42,420 programmes, fewer than half are registered.
- 2022**  
DBE officially assumes responsibility of ECD, establishes the foundation for an ECD data framework, with support from Ilifa.
- 2023**  
DBE, with Ilifa support, designs a digital management information system (now called eCares).
- 2024**  
eCares launched, alongside Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive.
- 2026**  
ECD conditional grant receives R12.8 billion over three years, expanding services to an additional 300,000 children.
- SEP 2026**  
39,621 ELPs registered on eCares, including almost 15,600 Bronze.



*“I would say this journey is a case study because since I started working in government in 1993, this is the first time we have developed a system working closely with the end user.”*

Bheki Mpanza, Chief Director: Education Management Information Systems, Department of Basic Education

## ONE SYSTEM, FIVE JOBS



### Programme records

Keep ELP, child and staff information up to date.



### Registration

Apply, upload documents, track status and receive notifications.



### Data & dashboards

Maintain the national master list and track progress in real time.



### Funding

Support digital funding applications and approvals.



### Quality

Capture assessments and build quality-improvement plans.

*The principle: data is created through the work itself, rather than through a separate reporting exercise.*

## DIGITAL DOES NOT MEAN EFFORTLESS

eCares is still evolving, and the people using it say so. Fast national rollout added to social workers' caseloads. Many practitioners struggle with digital skills and the cost of data, and in-person clinics have proved the most effective help. Data quality is uneven while older systems and eCares run side by side. The first digital subsidy pilot, with about 400 programmes, took around four months just to get profiles ready. About 3,400 programmes, caring for an estimated 190,000 children, are still unregistered. Technology works best when people stand behind it.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

- Keep the climb going, from 25–30 approvals a day towards one per district per day.
- Use live data to see where applications get stuck, and send support there.
- Deepen integrations with other government systems. eCares is already integrated with the National Child Protection Register, SASSA and Home Affairs are next.
- Take digital subsidy applications nationwide in 2028/29.

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Source: Empowering the early years: eCares and digital public infrastructure for early learning in South Africa, Ilifa Labantwana, 2026. For more information about registration, visit the ECD Infohub at [ecdinfohub.org](http://ecdinfohub.org), where all registration guides and materials are kept, or apply at [dbecares.gov.za](http://dbecares.gov.za).



A young learner in the Eastern Cape.

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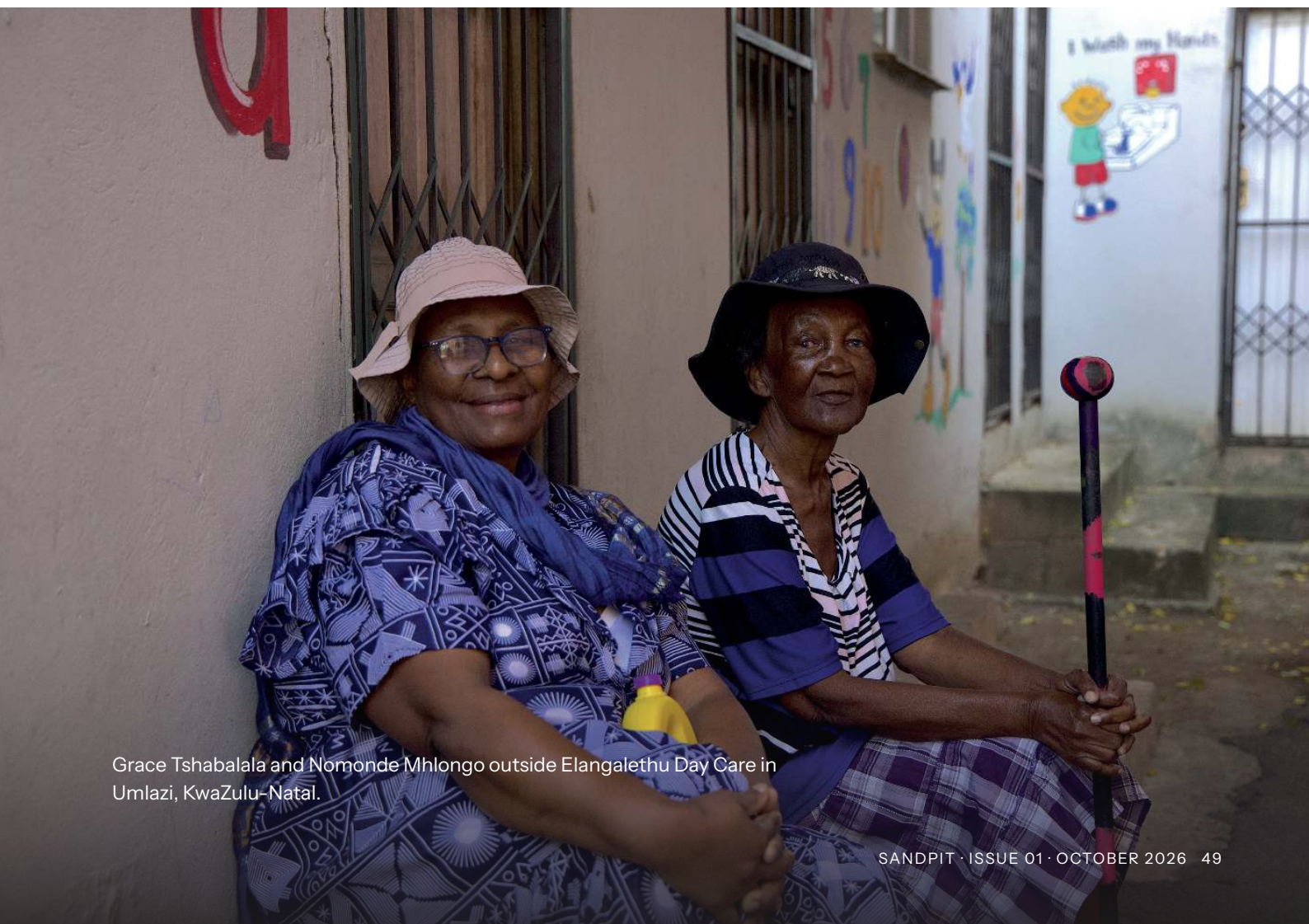
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Luthando at Lovebirds Day Care Centre in Duncan Village, KuGompo.



Grace Tshabalala and Nomonde Mhlongo outside Elangaletu Day Care in Umlazi, KwaZulu-Natal.



Children at Kiddies Love Day Care in Motherwell, Gqeberha.

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## *Credits*

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Front: Mpho at Bubble Bee Educare in  
Kayamandi

Back: Children walk together to a creche  
in Kokstad

## JOIN THE MOVEMENT



Your logo here  
Join the movement

# I Am *Bana Pele*

Putting children first starts with each of us.



*"We should all come together to raise the child. When a child leaves home, he or she should grow up surrounded by people who love him or her."*

Nomfundo Hlongwe, Khethokuhle Day Care, Umzumbe, KZN

Across South Africa, practitioners, parents, communities and partners are finding ways to put children first. The next chapter of Bana Pele depends on more people joining them.



*What does putting children first mean to you?*

**Join the movement and discover how you can contribute.**



The Bana Pele website goes live on 20 October: [banapele.org](http://banapele.org)  
To get involved now, or have any questions: [admin@banapele.org](mailto:admin@banapele.org)