

CONNECTED EDUCATION
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BRIDGE
LINKING INNOVATORS IN EDUCATION

WHAT CONSTITUTES

QUALITY IN ECD

IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

A BRIDGE Knowledge Product



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LINKING INNOVATORS IN EDUCATION

What constitutes 'quality' in Early Childhood Development (ECD) is of vital interest to those concerned with improving provision in this critical sector. Government has identified the need to enhance the quality of ECD programmes and services as well as increase access to ECD, while the sector as a whole (both locally and internationally) is attempting to deepen its understanding of the many influences that affect the quality of delivery. In working towards an understanding of the notion of quality in ECD, BRIDGE's ECD Community of Practice (CoP) developed a Quality Reflection Tool. The self-reflection tool aims to help practitioners explore different aspects of ECD in relation to their experience. The CoP felt that it was essential to gather more insights on quality from the perspectives of practitioners on the ground, operating in a range of different contexts. BRIDGE's pilot study revealed some interesting findings on the topic. Three sites in particular offer key insights into what practitioners understand as good quality ECD in different environments.

The first is a deep rural location in Mpumalanga. The home-based ECD centre is located in a small village characterised by a high rate of unemployment, and a lack of local services. Locals are often forced to hitchhike across long distances to purchase goods. Lessons at the centre are conducted in a garage and the main house has electricity, but no running water (water is collected from the local river). The ECD Practitioner working in this space highlighted a number of challenges which confront practitioners working in rural contexts. One of these is the difficulty of getting support from government, in that practitioners in rural contexts generally have access to few support services and often have limited teaching resources. "I get no support as none of the governmental departments will travel to such a remote area", she explained. Another is the lack of running water, though the practitioner felt it was more important that she had access to teaching and learning resources. In a more urban context these priorities might be reversed, illustrating that what constitutes "quality" in ECD is bound up in culture and shaped by the context-specific nature of local priorities.

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This was true for a second rural site in KwaZulu-Natal – a community-based centre in a Catholic Church built from cement blocks and corrugated iron. Here the question of context turned to the cultural and religious dynamics at play in the ECD group and the expectations of the parent community. The practitioner explained that she did not think girls should be allowed to sit cross-legged and found it offensive when other practitioners allowed it in their centres. She also flagged discipline as an area of concern, noting that corporal punishment, though illegal, was sanctioned by the larger community. Despite communal pressure, the practitioner shared how some of the discipline methods she had been taught helped her discipline the children without resorting to force. This case illustrates how contextual elements are managed by practitioners in creative ways. In spite of her community's beliefs, the practitioner is defining and negotiating what quality in ECD means for herself.

This process of negotiating priorities also took place at a third site – an urban, home-based ECD centre in the Western Cape. The group here meets in a small room alongside the facilitator's home. The Early Learning Facilitator (ELF) kept the room locked at all times and the children in her care were not allowed to play outside because of the high rate of gang-related crimes in the community, and the possibility of street violence affecting the children. The immediate dangers in the environment influenced the practitioner's understanding and implementation of quality ECD. Her opinions on free play were directly determined by the realities of her context. While she saw the small locked room as acceptable, another individual from a more secure context may have viewed the space as inadequate.

Despite these different contextual constraints, BRIDGE's study documents the creative ways in which practitioners worked around the limitations of their environment. Where there was little experience or formal expertise in rural areas, there was passion and commitment; and where there was a lack of resources, innovative

solutions were sometimes found. Initiatives aimed at improving the provision of ECD in South Africa need to recognise the demands of different contexts and cultures. In order for this to happen, education planners and providers need to understand the role that context plays in provision on the ground, and build in ways of linking concepts of quality to implementation practices.

To access the BRIDGE ECD Quality Reflection Tool, click [here](#).