

# Policy Brief: Early Childhood Care and Education programmes in South Africa: Demand and Supply factors affecting enrolment



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Early childhood care and education (ECCE) services are critical to achieving children's rights to health, protection, survival and development. A key policy goal for South Africa is to ensure that all children have access to quality ECCE services. This policy brief summarises the main findings from a study<sup>1</sup> investigating determinants of ECCE enrolment.

## Main findings

- **Household income matters for ECCE enrolment.** Three-quarters of children living in the richest 20% households are enrolled in an ECCE centre, compared to less than half of children living in the poorest 40 percent of households.
- **The more educated a child's mother is, the more likely they are to be enrolled in ECCE.**
- **Households with at least one unemployed or economically inactive member have lower ECCE enrolment rates.**
- **Children living further away from ECCE centres are far less likely to be enrolled** than those children living closer to ECCE centres.
- **Access to ECCE centres is worst in rural areas**, meaning that poor children in these areas are least able to overcome nutrition and development challenges that are attributable to their home environments.
- Given that enrolment rates are lowest in South Africa's rural, tribal authority and farm areas; this is where much of the work needs to be done to ensure that universal access to quality ECCE services in South Africa is realised by 2030.

## Why enrolment in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) matters for children and their families

In 2018, just over half of South Africa's children (between the ages of 2 and 5 years) were enrolled in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes. ECCE is a recognised contributor to children's learning gains and later success in the job market. Meanwhile, children's enrolment in ECCE programs also frees

up parents/caregivers to work or look for work.<sup>2</sup> In the South African context, this is particularly relevant for gender equity and women's upliftment, given the growth of women-headed households, and the growing participation of women in jobs market over the past three decades.<sup>3,4</sup> Expanded ECCE enrolment also has

<sup>1</sup> This Policy Brief is based on a working paper written for the Ilifa|Resep ECD Working Paper Series. <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/ilifa-resep-eecd-working-paper-series/>

societal benefits, which include lower crime rates, lower infant death rates, lower welfare dependency rates and possible benefits to democracy through more informed voting behaviour.<sup>5,6</sup>

Despite ECD’s critical role in advancing the welfare of children, families, and wider society; sub-Saharan African countries have typically experienced low gross enrolment rates of pre-school children in ECCE

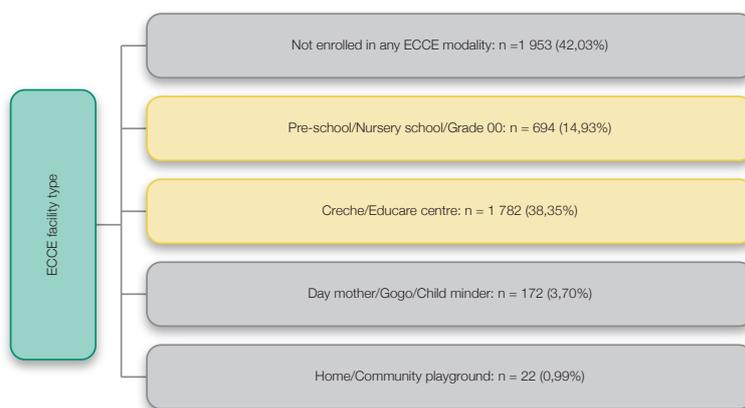
programmes.<sup>7</sup> Low enrolment rates, together with poor nutrition and living conditions, are likely to perpetuate poverty patterns and intergenerational inequality.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore important that researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders understand the demand and supply-side factors that influence poor ECCE enrolment in South Africa, so that resources to address low enrolment rates are directed in more targeted and sustainable ways.

## What constitutes ECCE enrolment?

For the purposes of this study, a child is defined as being enrolled in an ECCE programme if they are attending a pre-school, nursery school, crèche or educare centre. Children who receive care through day mother/gogo/childminder arrangements, or through home-based and community programmes are not included. The focus of this study is on children aged between 2 and 5 years old.

Using this definition, 53.3% of the General Household Survey (GHS)’s unweighted sample<sup>ii</sup> is enrolled in an ECCE programme (shown in the green bars in Figure 1). Weighting the sample to represent the South African population, this represents approximately 2.1 million children who are either in pre-school or an educare centre.

**Figure 1 Types of ECCE services in South Africa, GHS 2018**



**Source:** Constructed using the unweighted sample in General Household Survey 2018 (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

## Key factors associated with ECCE enrolment in South Africa

ECCE enrolment rates differ dramatically, dependent on where children live, their socio-economic circumstances, and the characteristics of the household that they live in.

In estimating the determinants of ECCE, the following findings emerge.

### ECCE enrolment differs by population group

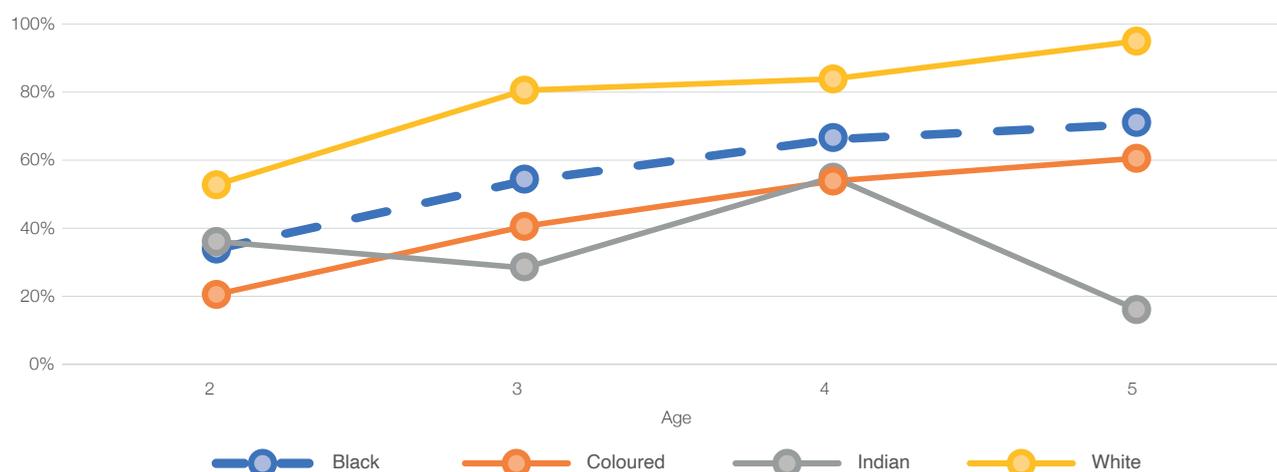
Figure 2 shows that ECCE enrollment rates differ by race, and increase as children get older. White children (aged 2 to 5 years) are most likely to be enrolled in ECCE programmes, regardless of age, followed by black children. Indian and Coloured children are least likely to be enrolled in ECCE, even after controlling for

other household and mother characteristics. Findings suggest that these households may have preferences for children to be cared for by family members or within less formal childcare arrangements, including daymothers/gogos.

ii The GHS 2018 collected data on a sample of approximately 71 000 individuals and is designed so that when the sample is weighted, researchers are able to produce statistics for the South African population at the national level. However, this paper deals with the data at very small area level, so that the weights used to make the sample more representative of the population cannot be used with confidence. As a result, the sample is analysed in its unweighted form.



**Figure 2 ECCE enrolment rates differ by age and population group (GHS 2018)**



Source: Constructed using the General Household Survey 2018 (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

### Poorer children are less likely to be enrolled in ECCE

Nearly three-quarters of children in the richest 20 percent of households (Quintile 5) are enrolled in ECCE centres, compared to only 42.7% of children in the poorest percent of households (Quintile 1).

**Table 1 ECCE enrolment for children 2 to 5 years old increases with per capita household income<sup>iii</sup>**

		Not enrolled	Enrolled	
HH Income Quintile	1	57.3%	42.7%	100%
	2	52.9%	47.1%	100%
	3	46.9%	53.1%	100%
	4	36.2%	63.8%	100%
	5	27.8%	72.2%	100%
<b>Total</b>		<b>46.9%</b>	<b>53.1%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Constructed using the General Household Survey 2018 (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

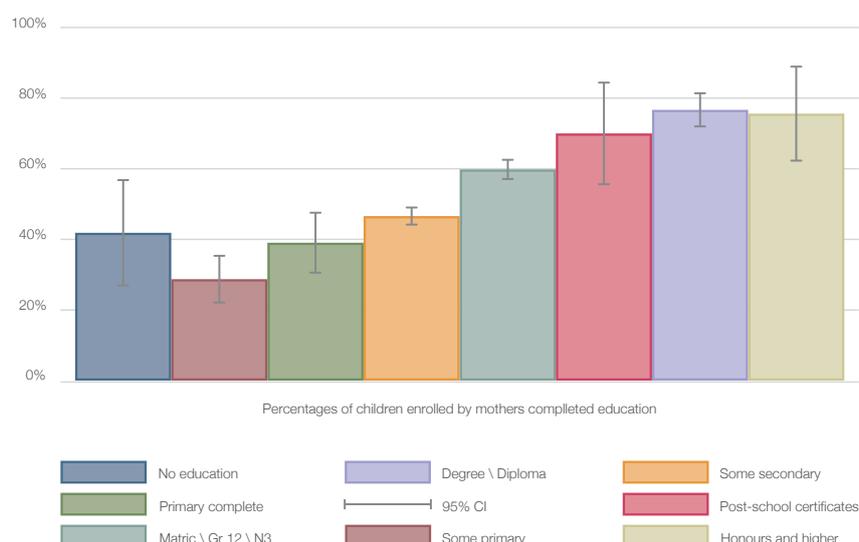
Children in poorer households may therefore be less likely than their better-off peers to be exposed to structured learning, productive unstructured learning, nutrition, or supporting social services. They are therefore at greater risk of starting formal schooling at a disadvantage.

### More educated mothers are more likely to enrol their children in ECCE

Three-quarters of children with university-educated mothers are enrolled in ECCE programmes, while less than half of children whose mothers had not completed high school were enrolled. Enrolment generally increases as the mother's educational attainment increases. This is expected as parents or caregivers with more understanding or appreciation of the benefits of early childhood education are more likely to enrol their children in ECCE programmes.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>iii</sup> Total household income is divided by the number of individuals within the household to get per capita household income. The per capita household incomes are then ranked from poorest to richest, and then divided into five income categories of equal size (referred to as income quintiles). Quintile 1 would consist of the poorest 20 percent of the population, while Quintile 5 would consist of the richest 20 percent of the population.

**Figure 3 ECCE enrolment for children aged 2-5 years increases with mother's educational attainment**



**Source:** Constructed using the unweighted General Household Survey 2018 (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

### Unemployed adults in the household reduce the probability of children's ECCE enrolment

Approximately 60% of children in the analysed age group live with at least one economically inactive person (not enrolled in school) in the same household. Having at least one person who is unemployed or economically inactive in the household reduces the probability of a child being enrolled by 13.4%.<sup>iv</sup>

Unemployment of household members not only reduces the household's ability to pay for ECCE fees, but could also reduce their demand for ECCE services. For example, an unemployed parent/caregiver could decide to care for children himself/herself and forego the costs of centre-based ECCE services.

### Living close to an ECCE programme is associated with higher enrolment rates

By spatially linking household survey data to information on where ECCE programmes are located, it is possible to investigate how ECCE enrolment is influenced by the availability of ECCE programmes. Table 2 reveals

that enrolment rates are low in enumerator areas (EA) where there are no ECCE programmes accessible to children (5.8%) and very high in enumerator areas where ECCE programmes are accessible (59%).

**Table 2 Enrolment rates for children aged 2 to 5-years increases with proximity to ECCE programmes**

		No ECCE programme in EA	ECCE programme in EA	
Enrolled	n	23	1 879	1 902
	%	5.8	59	53.1
Not enrolled	n	375	1 304	1 679
	%	94.2	41	31.8
Total	n	398	3 183	3 581
	%	100	100	100

**Source:** Constructed using General Household Survey 2018 (Statistics South Africa, 2018) and Early Childhood Education Centre Audit data (Department of Social Development, 2014). EA = enumerator area.

<sup>iv</sup> As estimated in a multivariate regression.

## How much would enrolment increase if all children resided in an area with an ECCE programme?

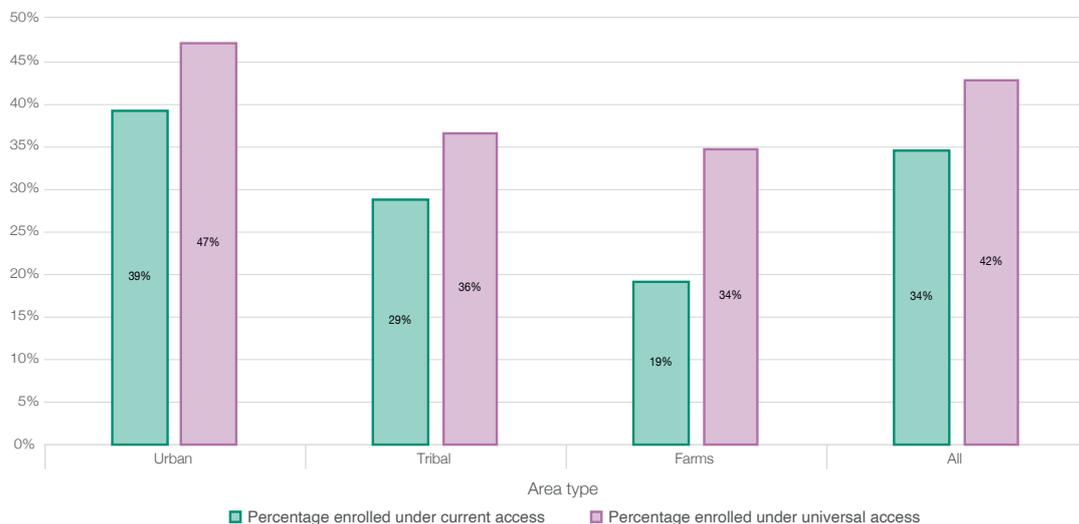
Drawing on regression modelling, Figure 4 shows the predicted probability of being enrolled under current and universal access to ECCE programmes by whether children live in urban, tribal<sup>v</sup> or farm areas. Overall, enrolment would only increase from 34% to 42% if all children lived in an area with an ECCE programme. Therefore, addressing ECCE programme supply is only one side of the coin to increasing ECCE enrolment.

However, targeting ECCE supply to specific areas could reduce significant inequalities in ECCE enrolment that currently exist in South Africa. For example, ensuring that there is an ECCE programme in every enumerator area, makes the biggest difference to ECCE enrolment in farm areas where enrolment increases from 19% to 34% with universal ECCE access. Rural and tribal

authority areas are also where children are most vulnerable to poverty-associated ills such as poor nutrition and health, which in themselves would affect later educational outcomes profoundly, and are therefore broadly where ECCE resources could be targeted to address the vast inequalities in child development.

*Expanding ECCE supply is not a magic bullet for increasing ECCE enrolment. However, targeting ECCE supply to specific areas could reduce significant geographic disparities in ECCE access and enrolment.*

**Figure 4 Universal ECCE supply is expected to have the biggest effects on probability of enrolment for children (aged 2-5 years) in farm areas.**



### Policy Recommendations

- **Address household financial constraints that affect ECCE enrolment.** Poorer households may need some financial assistance in the forms of conditional cash transfers or demand-side vouchers to increase enrolment. However, the feasibility and impact of providing such incentives to the household needs to be examined in environments where information systems are weak and quality ECCE programmes are in short supply.
- **Increase the supply of well-functioning ECCE programmes in remote areas.** Children living in South Africa's traditional authority and farm areas may benefit considerably from increased supply of programmes. These need not be centre-based if they are high quality.
- **Conduct further research that focuses on the relationship between unemployed adults in the household, and ECCE enrolment rates.** While the possible pathways through which unemployed adults in the household affect enrolment rates are debatable, the fact remains that enrolment in quality ECCE programmes is likely to be constrained in the near future by South Africa's extremely high unemployment rates.

<sup>v</sup> Land under the control of a tribal or traditional authority.



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