



Upskilling Initiatives Leave Early Childhood Development Practitioners Over 35 Behind

Ageism is letting down the young

Early childhood development (ECD) lays the groundwork for a child's future. Yet, with the [National Skills Development Strategy](#) prioritising training for those under the age of 35, the expertise and dedication of mature practitioners is overlooked.

The [Santa Shoebox Project \(SSP\)](#) believes these women are invested in their work — and should be invested in — to make a meaningful difference in the quality of education provided to South African children.

“While private and public sector entities are required to comply with the elements outlined in the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) scorecard, the socio-economic development (SED) component is typically focused on lower age groups,” explains SSP Finance Manager Nikki Lopes. “The younger the beneficiaries, the more points Government and businesses get for their training efforts. The ideal SED funding age is 18 to 25, ensuring that the entity receives the most kickbacks. It's very unfortunate, because it means that less funding is made available to train older women - the ones who have dedicated their lives to this all-important sector.”

Citing data from the national [Thrive by Five Index](#), she points out that only 46% of preschool-aged children meet their developmental milestones, meaning they are ill-equipped to succeed at school. “These results are not surprising, given that the [2021 ECD Census](#) found that only 52% of 165,059 ECD staff were qualified, 27% had undergone a relevant skills programme and 22% were unqualified.”

Lopes highlights that furthering their own education is out of reach for most ECD practitioners because they cannot afford upskilling. “The Department of Basic Education (DBE) reports that 89.5% of practitioners [earn less than minimum wage](#) which currently stands at [R27,58 per hour](#) and equates to approximately R4,770.00 per month for a 40-hour work week.”

Recognising the importance of this training, through its SSP Legacy arm, the nonprofit organisation facilitates the provision of skills acquisition initiatives, thus far enabling approximately 1,250 practitioners to enhance their skills and qualifications - already impacting the lives of nearly 63,000 children attending ECD centres.

“Some of the ECD practitioners who are benefitting from the training will attain NQF level 4 and 5 certification - equivalent to a matric and an advanced national vocational certificate respectively - and would never have been able to afford it themselves, nor would the DBE have supported them due to their age,” notes Lopes.

One of the participants, 43-year-old Chantel Slinger, left school when she fell pregnant with her first child. She worked as a cleaner and dreamed of a better life. Eighteen years later, she received the shocking news that she was not only pregnant again — with twins — but that her husband had lost his job. After the birth of their special needs twins, they struggled to find a creche. “I wanted to help other parents who are in a similar position.”

Another, Mary Ann Davids, was one of six children, raised by a single mother. With nobody to help her, she struggled academically and dropped out of school. The 58-year-old has worked as an ECD practitioner for more than two decades but realised she needed qualifications. “I looked for a college but did not have the money to attend, which is why I applied to the SSP Legacy programme.”

Lopes shares that this year SSP has allocated R300,000 towards training teachers up to NQF Level 4 — the funding for which came directly from the sale of Virtual Santa Shoeboxes which are allocated to underprivileged children living in remote areas of South Africa. “It’s a gift that keeps on giving.”

“South Africa must prioritise investment in experienced ECD practitioners. If we want to improve the matric pass rate it needs to start with having qualified educators in the formative years. By supporting their ongoing training and education, we can empower practitioners and improve outcomes for children. But we need to spend as much time and money training older practitioners as younger ones, given the impact they will have on the next generation,” she concludes.

About the Santa Shoebox Programmes

Traditional Santa Shoebox: Over the last 18 years, 1 226 756 Santa Shoeboxes, each containing eight specified items of treats and essentials, have been given to underprivileged and socially vulnerable children throughout South Africa and Namibia. From 01 September each year, Santa Shoebox donors choose their beneficiary child/ren by name, age and gender and are given the child's clothing size. Each personalised shoebox reaches the very child for whom it was pledged.

Virtual Santa Shoebox: These shoeboxes are purchased online by donors and are available year-round, meeting the needs of donors who live too far from drop-off points, are too busy to shop or have health issues. Components are chosen by the donor on the Santa Shoebox website, the shoeboxes are packed by the Santa Shoebox Team and delivered to children attending far-flung rural facilities. A Virtual Santa Shoebox contains the eight specified items, as well as additional items, such as a lunchbox and books. A Virtual Santa Shoebox costs R450 plus an optional delivery fee of R30.

Santa Shoebox Legacy: All Santa Shoebox Project operating costs are covered by corporate sponsors. Privately donated funds and surplus funds generated by the sale of Virtual Santa Shoeboxes accrue to the SSP Legacy, and are used to bring permanent change to the lives of Santa Shoebox beneficiary children and the impoverished communities in which they live.

Fiduciary information: As a Level One Contributor to B-BBEE, the Santa Shoebox Project earns 100 points on the generic scorecard, and with Section 18A status, is able to provide a tax-deductible receipt in recognition of donations. The Project is an initiative of the JOG Trust (IT2671/2009). The Trust is registered as a Public Benefit Organisation (PBO-930031301), a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO 102-098) and holds a current ICPR in support of 100% SED compliance.

Social media:

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YouTube: The Santa Shoebox Project

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