

The Draft National Curriculum Framework for Birth to Four Years

Joint Submission to DBE Consultation

This joint submission to the consultation on the draft National Curriculum Framework for Birth to Four Years has been prepared by Wordworks and is endorsed by the following organisations and individuals:

Organisations:

- Centre for Early Childhood Development
- Equal Education
- Foundation for Community Work
- National Early Childhood Development Alliance
- Pebbles Project
- Primary Science Programme
- The Shine Centre
- South African Montessori Association (SAMA)
- True North

Individuals:

- Eve Annecke, Director, **Sustainability Institute**
- Robyn Davis, Head of ECD Department, **Centre for Creative Education**
- Dr Nosisi Feza, Senior Research Specialist, Education and Skills Development, **Human Sciences Research Council**
- Mary-G Hautle, ECD Coordinator, **Southern African Federation of Waldorf Schools**
- Professor Elizabeth Henning, Director: Centre for Education Practice Research, **University of Johannesburg Institute for Childhood Education**
- Gail Rossini, Education Mentor, **Knysna Education Trust**
- Lesley Satchel, Literacy Specialist and Trustee, **Knysna Education Trust**

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Key Issues

- 1. The government must urgently clarify why this document is being produced – in particular, what its *practical* purpose and uses are – and review and reorganise the structure and content accordingly.**

The draft National Curriculum Framework (NCF) states that it is for adults working with pre-school children, including parents and caregivers, early childhood practitioners, practitioner educator and support staff, and monitoring personnel who visit the ECD programmes.

This is an extremely diverse audience. They have vastly different levels of baseline knowledge, different skills and understanding, different resources available to them, and different levels of language competence. By trying to speak to all of them, the draft NCF speaks to none of them effectively. The document is 140 pages long, dense and unnecessarily complicated. Most parents and ordinary ECD practitioners will find it impenetrable or unmanageable as a practical resource.

How could this be done differently?

- The National Curriculum Framework should be just that – a framework. It should be a short narrative document (without long detailed tables) aimed at provincial/ district ECD planners and advisers, ECD service managers, and preschool principals. This approach has been used successfully by many countries, including the UK, Australia, Sweden and Finland. It allows for greater flexibility in local implementation and practices that reflect the social, cultural and linguistic context.
- The NCF should be accompanied by 1) guidelines for implementation for early childhood practitioners, 2) information and tools for parents and carers. These accompanying documents should be more 'hands on' and have a tone and content carefully tailored to meet the needs of their audiences to ensure that they are actually used in practice.

- 2. The development period for the NCF should be extended in order to bring it into step with national ECD policy development, and to allow for meaningful involvement of leading experts and all ECD stakeholders.**

The new national ECD policy and comprehensive programme will be published by the Department for Social Development next year. It is not clear how the NCF will relate to this new overarching framework, but it would make sense for them to be developed together rather than separately.

Consultation on the draft NCF has been wholly inadequate. Most ECD stakeholders were not even aware it was in development let alone given the opportunity to be involved. Furthermore, it is evident from the content that specialists in different fields have not been invited to contribute to the drafting in a meaningful way.

How could this be done differently?

- The NCF should be developed in tandem with the new national ECD policy and comprehensive framework, to ensure that together these key documents make a coherent whole that is understood by the sector.
- A steering group that includes specialists in different fields as well as proper representation from the ECD sector should be set up to guide the completion of the NCF, and meet regularly to guide progress. Child health experts, nutrition experts, child psychologists and early language and literacy experts should be among the specialists on the steering group and properly involved in re-drafting. The new ECD Inter-sectoral Forum should also be given a clear role in finalising the document.

3. The early language and literacy content should be reviewed to bring it into line with international best practice and the most up-to-date evidence.

Early language is at the heart of all childhood learning and central to young children's wellbeing and development. But the draft NCF's guidance and examples for early language and literacy learning are not in line with prevailing best practice. The lack of a coherent theoretical framework for how language and literacy develops from birth, as well as contradictions over the teaching of early literacy skills, are likely to cause significant confusion for parents and ECD practitioners.

How could this be done differently?

- Early language and literacy experts should be involved in revising the draft NCF, to ensure that the final document accurately reflects the evidence-base and what we know about how children learn language and literacy skills.
- The government should adopt a clear theoretical framework for how early language and literacy learning is supported and facilitated, which can underpin the relevant content in the NCF and ensure clarity and consistency.

4. There should be clear guidance on how ECD practitioners can support mother tongue language learning in multilingual settings.

South Africa is a multicultural, multilingual country, and this presents particular challenges and opportunities around early language learning. The draft NCF does not adequately address this crucial issue nor provide any practical guidance for ECD practitioners on how best to support language learning in multilingual contexts.

How could this be done differently?

- The NCF should directly address the challenges around early language learning in multilingual settings. It should provide guidance for ECD practitioners on how they can support mother tongue learning even when they do not speak the language, and at what stage it may be appropriate to introduce and support second language learning. Language experts should be consulted about best practice with regard to supporting multilingualism in ECD settings.