




Chapter 7

Flourishing Early Childhood Development through empowering families: The contribution of the CHICS Programme to parental agency and family–ECD dynamics

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Abstract

Early infancy is vital for development and growth, with long-term effects. Many children struggle in the early years and may not receive sufficient support to engage in developmental activities throughout these crucial years. Families must be equipped and reinforced to enhance the development of their children. Significant advantages may come from family-centred programmes enhancing parental agency and family dynamics for early childhood development (ECD). This qualitative study explored the growth and contribution of the Community Household Interface Care and Support (CHICS) programme of



the Nova Institute. This qualitative study was implemented through a document review and analysis by examining documents covering 2010 to 2023. Important findings illustrate how CHICS developed from a community-based franchise model to an ECD centre-based model, thereby enhancing economics and sustainability. The programme curriculum's core strengths – parental agency, family-ECD centre collaboration, and whole child development – turned out to be its essence. CHICS provided better interactions between parents and ECD professionals, increased parental engagement in children's schooling, and supported parent networks. Furthermore, the CHICS programme encourages family-ECD centre cooperation so that parents may participate in the development of their children. By changing family dynamics and parent agency at the micro level, community-based interventions such as the CHICS programme may help ECD systemically. This emphasises the importance of policy and financial tools to increase empowerment-based family interventions to foster early childhood flourishing, particularly amongst disadvantaged groups.

Keywords: early childhood development, ECD centres, family, Nova, nurturing care framework, South Africa

1. Introduction

South African children face numerous challenges in their early childhood development, including a lack of food, poor public services, and abuse. These issues significantly impact their health and development, with up to 6% of children at risk of malnutrition. Poverty also affects two-thirds of these children, potentially having lasting negative effects on their future (Giese et al., 2022; Bridgman & Von Fintel, 2022; Ward et al., 2018; Meinck et al., 2016). Early childhood development (hereafter ECD) centres play a crucial role, but many children are not physically or cognitively prepared by the time they start primary school (Giese et al., 2022). In South Africa, 41% of ECD centres operate without registration, often caused by their inability to meet essential government standards. Many of these centres face infrastructural limitations that undermine their capacity to care effectively (Atmore et al., 2012; South Africa, 2022). It

is of concern that many children are not well prepared, either physically or cognitively, by the time they have to join schools. What is more, many of these centres operate without being formally recognised because of their inability to meet minimum standards set by the government concerning the state of facilities and safety.

To address these pressing issues, the Nova Institute pioneered the CHICS programme, which fosters close collaboration with communities and views them as active participants rather than as mere beneficiaries. The programme involves training CHICS officers, implementing a child-focused curriculum on life skills, and holding monthly meetings to address parental concerns and mobilise community action for child development. These gatherings highlight the importance of caregiver agency and cooperation amongst community members, building a supportive environment for children.

Enhancing parental involvement is key to the success and sustainability of initiatives aimed at early childhood development. Studies show that programmes targeting parents directly, such as home visitations, are particularly effective in improving early childhood outcomes (Heckman & Mosso, 2014; Kim et al., 2018; García & Heckman, 2022; Bierman et al., 2017; Brentani et al., 2021). However, the high costs associated with these programmes can limit their feasibility and scalability, especially in low-income settings. The CHICS programme presents innovative methods for engaging parents through ECD centres, offering a more cost-effective and sustainable approach to enhancing early childhood development.

Emphasising the difficulties that South African children experience in early childhood development, this chapter seeks to emphasise the vital role that ECD centres play in strengthening families and communities. The chapter introduces the CHICS programme as a creative, community-based solution to help improve the lives of children in early childhood development. The emphasis of this chapter is the value of parental participation and exploring affordable approaches to help children to flourish through families in environments

with limited resources. Following the introduction, this chapter locates a document analysis within a nurturing care framework. Emanating from this framework is a discussion of the application of the nurturing care framework to different environments of the child. Following these perspectives, the methodological approach of the review is presented, and the chapter ends with a discussion and conclusion.

2. The Nurturing Care Framework

The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) is a crucial tool for identifying what children need to thrive. According to the World Health Organization et al. (2018), the NCF is all about ensuring that children receive a desirable start in life through health, nutrition, safety, responsive care, and early learning opportunities. These elements are crucial because they establish a foundation for a child's future development. But it is not just about listing these needs; the NCF goes further by recognising that the support systems in place might not always be up to par, especially in underprivileged areas. To address this, the NCF makes four key recommendations:

1. **Strengthening Families:** This approach equips parents and caregivers with tools to create a supportive home environment, including responsive caregiving programmes, financial services such as subsidised childcare and healthcare, and community support groups and workshops. These resources help parents to meet their children's emotional needs, invest more time in nurturing, and guide their children's growth.
2. **Providing Essential Services:** Access to essential services such as immunisations, nutritional supplements, and health checks is crucial for every child's healthy growth. Tailored education ensures relevance and engagement. Eliminating obstacles such as cost, transportation, and lack of information can ensure that these services reach every child, providing equal opportunities for success regardless of their family's economic situation.
3. **Supportive Policy Advocacy:** To ensure early childhood development, policies should focus on universal pre-primary

education, robust child protection measures, and adequate parental leave. These holistic policies should incorporate health, education, and social welfare, and collaboration amongst governments, non-profit organisations, and community groups is crucial for ensuring children's rights and well-being.

- 4. Consistency in National Initiatives:** Children's needs evolve with societal changes, necessitating adaptable approaches across health, education, nutrition, and child protection. Harmony between sectors is crucial, preventing overlap and optimising resource use. Global best practices and regular updates ensure relevance and effectiveness, embracing innovative solutions and new challenges.

What really sets the NCF apart is its focus on the environments, including physical environments, that shape a child's early years, mainly their homes and communities. It emphasises the vital role that caregivers play in providing love and care, and highlights how crucial it is for communities to advocate for and protect their youngest members. As noted by Black and Trude (2019), the family and community setting are not just a backdrop for development; it is where the magic of growth happens. Within the NCF, various environments can assist the flourishing of children in their early years.

2. The importance of nurturing environments

ECD, covering physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development from birth to eight years old, is essential for human capital development and poverty reduction. It promotes learning, educational success, and professional opportunities by ensuring their health, welfare, and accomplishments (Bekir, 2020). Stressors, poverty, and malnutrition in early childhood increase children's risk of developmental challenges. Timing is crucial for appropriate evaluation and intervention to reduce developmental issues in children (Dong et al., 2023). Investing in ECD fosters equitable, comprehensive and sustainable development, progress, and integration. It promotes knowledge acquisition, school success, and future employment, which may boost family well-being,

economic productivity, and growth (Cui et al., 2020). Nurturing children and investing in the early years are beneficial (Daelmans et al., 2021). The first environment of nurturing is within the family.

Families are crucial to child-rearing. Children need a solid foundation from their parents (Hasanova, 2022). Families operate in ways that benefit children (and future adults). For example, cooperation between family members in completing tasks fosters reciprocity and strengthens the family unit, leading to happiness and fulfilment; distributing responsibilities between family members promotes cohesion and mutually beneficial relationships; strong family relationships based on love, confidence, and admiration are crucial for child development; and creating strong emotional bonds between parents and children. Poor families struggle to provide a supportive atmosphere because of limited resources and unexpected conditions (Gao, 2020). Parents invest in their children based on socioeconomic position, income, education, assets, employment, and social capital (Wati & Sahid, 2022; Zhang, 2021). Parents' conduct affects their parenting. Recognising the varied obstacles and conditions that families confront is crucial (Wati & Sahid, 2022; Zhang, 2021). Children's growth and well-being may benefit from support systems and resources that enhance family relationships and bonds, parental skills, and socioeconomic challenges. While the family initiates child development, the ECD centre enhances it.

Children's future successes depend on ECD availability, help, and processes. It prepares the learner or student for achievement in reading, science, languages, leisure, and creativity (Shavkatovna, 2023). ECD centres not only offer controlled instruction and care but also lay a firm foundation which may reduce the likelihood of retaking courses and dropping out of school (Bai et al., 2020). Furthermore, ECD centres provide advantages beyond cognitive skill development. Young children learn respect, affection, care, security, imagination stimulation, attention to body and emotional needs, development of good habits, economic and social independence, support of children's rights, access to profitable

job opportunities, basic life skills, and an environment that fosters educational and fundamental abilities (Jeong et al., 2021; Milbrath et al., 2020). ECD centres are located within communities that support families and these centres.

A nurturing and supportive community enables healing and development by listening and responding to its members. Community support is a crucial factor for the survival of early childhood development centres. ECD Centres often connect families, educators, and community resources because they are ingrained in the social fabric of their communities. Community support for ECD development and centres can often be seen in volunteering, offering resources, sponsoring events, fostering social connections and so on. This support, as community engagement, may assist in overcoming resource limits (Devenish et al., 2020).

Clearly, a vision for flourishing children requires nurturing environments, but in South Africa, ECD presents several issues. These include a lack of (1) access to high-quality ECD programmes and facilities, particularly in poor rural communities; (2) funding, especially in underdeveloped areas and reduced government assistance for ECD facilities; (3) quality caused by variations in ECD initiatives across many locations and institutions; (4) proper infrastructure and amenities; and (5) uniformity in the curriculum and programmes. Furthermore, ECD practitioners may lack the appropriate training and credentials. Particularly in informal areas, ECD centres may not be registered, and parental involvement and participation may be limited (Ally et al., 2022; Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018).

The Community Household Interface Care and Support (CHICS) programme of the Nova Institute is an example of flourishing early childhood development through the family. The aim of the CHICS programme is for every child in Southern Africa to be raised in a nurturing and wholesome environment. This is the place where children have the chance to fully meet their basic human needs within the settings of their own homes, and to have an improved quality of life. The purpose is to enhance the quality of life for children by connecting

and empowering parents. The CHICS initiative operates on the belief that increased parental involvement in the home environment and the ECD centres leads to improved quality of life and better educational results for children, hence increasing their chances of success. Providing mentoring and assistance to ECD principals facilitates increased parental involvement in their children's development. This is achieved by supporting and fostering parental engagement and empowerment via the dissemination of trustworthy information on early children's development and quality of life, and by offering them venues for effective implementation. An optimal household environment is crucial for promoting the well-being of children and the broader community. It is well recognised that early childhood development, which significantly impacts quality of life, starts inside the family. This nurturing environment is essential for children to flourish.

To understand the contribution of the CHICS programme to ECD centres, parents, and the development of children in the early years, a qualitative study was conducted by implementing a document review and analysis.

3. Method

A qualitative document analysis was conducted to explore the available records and programme reports of CHICS. The records were studied using thematic analysis to understand programme history, challenges, accomplishments, and decision-making. The study used three document categories: 1) user manuals for CHICS officers, teachers, principals, participating congregations, and supporting staff; 2) annual reports to funders on the programme's progress, lessons learned, and successes; and 3) feedback reports from participating early childhood development centres, which may include interviews or focus groups. After the initial screening of all the available CHICS programme reports, survey methodology and curriculum instructions were excluded since they were irrelevant to the study. Afterwards, a thematic analysis was conducted on the pertinent reports, as shown in Table 5. Rereading the reports helped to identify tendencies that might explain the programme's evolution and

the increase in parental engagement and agency throughout its implementation. The programme development text, improvement choices, and participant input on their favourite parts were emphasised and combined. After that, the material was categorised chronologically and thematically to show the CHICS programme's progress and success in encouraging parental participation and agency.

Table 5: The documents accessed for the analysis

Phase	Name	Years	Reports used
1	Franchise Model	2010 – 2017	Manual for the establishment of a CHICS project team (Nova, 2011) CHICS Officer Manual (Nova, 2010) CHICS Operational Social Franchise Manual (Nova, 2017) Manual for Parental Empowerment Group Meetings (Nova, 2015) Report on CHICS Parents Focus Group Sessions (Nova, 2021) Project Implementation: Narrative Report (Nova, 2017) Project Implementation: Narrative Report (Nova, 2018)
2	Principal Model	2019 – current	Project/Programmatic Cooperation: Narrative Report (Nova, 2019) Narrative Report for NOVA – Brickstar and CHICS 2019–2020 Project number: 110114/341 (Nova, 2020) Narrative report. CHICS Programme and Strengthening the Brickstar Network 2020–2022 Project number: 100000/097 (Nova, 2021) Narrative Report for CHICS Programme and Strengthening the Brickstar Network 2020–2022 Project number: 100000/097 (Nova, 2022) Narrative report NOVA 2022–2024. Project number: 100000/186 (Nova, 2023)

Phase	Name	Years	Reports used
3	Green CHICS	2021 – current	Strengthening the Brickstar network 2020–2022 Project number: 100000/097 (Nova, 2022) Narrative report NOVA 2022–2023. Project number: 100000/186 (Nova, 2023) Feasibility testing report of the Green CHICS Programme in four ECD Centres. Narrative Report 2022

Over the last 15 years, the CHICS programme has had three distinct phases: 1) the Franchise Model was the original CHICS model, which employed an external fieldworker known as the CHICS Officer to manage and facilitate the day-to-day programme at the ECD centres; 2) the Principal Model, when the principal was trained to act as the CHICS officer at their own ECD centre; 3) the Green CHICS model, that had a similar structure as the principal model but focuses more on the children’s immediate natural environment than on quality of life in general.¹

4. Results

4.1 Social Franchise Model

The CHICS programme was initially structured on a model called the Social Franchise Model. A franchise is one of the methods to duplicate a programme, service, or business through a contractual relationship between independent entities. The franchisor, in this case, Nova Institute, developed and packaged a product or service, the CHICS programme, and made it available through licensing to other third parties (the franchisees) that met the criteria to locally own and implement it in a clearly defined manner, at a specified location and for a given period. The signing of the license agreement illustrated that Nova (franchisor) granted the rights to the franchisee to use and apply the CHICS programme brand name and its intellectual

¹ Editors’ note: Quality of life is an enduring theme throughout the book. See, for example, Chapter 12.

property. In return for the franchisees' rights to use Nova's CHICS concept, Nova obtained the rights to monitor all the local operations and to take any action to ensure system compliance and quality.

4.1.1 *The role of the church*

In the early parts of CHICS, close collaboration with the local churches was an important partner in ensuring access to communities and implementing the programme at daycare centres. The CHICS Project Team Manual (Nova, 2011) states: "Many crèches [ECD Centres] are connected to a church or church group in some or other way. Church facilities are often used as a daycare or aftercare centre. This is a cost-effective use of space that would otherwise be wasted. Staff are often volunteers from the community who have minimal training. They look after the children in return for a small wage."

The Nova Institute saw the connection between the church and the crèche and advocated for the church to actively and significantly contribute to the growth and well-being of the children in their congregation and community. This is also evident in the initial acronym of CHICS, "Church Household Interface Care and Support" (CHICS Officer's Manual 2010, Project Team Manual, 2011). The Project Team Manual (Nova, 2011) stated: "The CHICS programme is built on the belief that the church could play a positive role in encouraging a healthy household culture. The programme offers an opportunity for congregations to make a hands-on difference in their local community." The manual continues: "There are many suffering children in Southern Africa. Poverty and illnesses like HIV/AIDS affecting them or their parents increase the severity of many children's situations. Congregations have access to important resources. Buildings, networks, funds, spirit-filled church members, etc".

The importance of the church is also evident in the number of times the words "church" (42) or "congregation" (116) were used in the Project Team Manual (2011), as opposed to the words "child" or "children" (51), "crèche" (69), "teacher" (8) or "principal" (0).

Several congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) played a significant role in the development of CHICS through funding and implementation, respectively, especially during the pre-feasibility phase. Nova signed franchise agreements and implemented CHICS as a social franchise with the church at six congregations. One was the DRC Lynwood Ridge Congregation, which implemented it at Mamelodi township of Pretoria in Gauteng. URCSA congregations were: the Kgautswane congregation, located in a rural village of Ohrigstad in Limpopo province; the Polokwane City congregation, which was implemented at its ward congregation, Ga-Mothiba, outside Polokwane in Limpopo province; the Hebron congregation in North West province; the Eendracht Congregation at Lesley township in Mpumalanga province; and the Phahameng congregation at Mamelodi in Gauteng province.

4.1.2 Establishing a network

Under the franchise model, the local congregation assisted in identifying the paid community member who would serve as the CHICS officer. It was their role to establish a solid network of contacts between the parents, the community, the crèche, and the church. A strong social network would enhance a child's upbringing. This is mentioned multiple times in the Project Team Manual (Nova, 2011):

- “The programme aims to bring together and establish a strong network of different role players who have child welfare at heart”;
- “The CHICS programme ... acts as a tool by which a local congregation, in cooperation with the CHICS office, can establish a relationship-based network that could improve children's quality of life. It is, therefore, not the CHICS programme's aim to take the place of or improve services that are already made available by the government or private institutions. The aim is rather to bring together people and institutions that could benefit children”; and
- “The CHICS officer has an important role to play in creating and maintaining a network of relationships

between congregations, nursery schoolteachers, parents, children, and service providers already established in the community”.

Building a network of relationships in which a child can thrive was also mentioned in the CHICS Officer’s Manual (Nova, 2015):

- “The general aim of CHICS is to develop and promote ways to improve quality of life of children. (This is done together with households and a wider community network of role players mentioned above of which daycare centres and local congregations play key roles)”; and
- “CHICS is a programme which introduces and facilitates the engagement of households, daycare centres, local congregation community stakeholders and specialists in a participatory process to improve the quality of life of the children, particularly vulnerable children.”

The importance of the CHICS officer building a network for the development of children in the community was also mentioned in other manuals:

- “We aim to bring together and establish a strong network of people who believe that children should have a proper quality of life and ultimately work towards reaching that goal” (Manual for Parental Empowerment Group Meetings, 2015); and
- in the CHICS Operational Social Franchise Manual (Nova, 2017), an entire chapter is dedicated to the guidelines on how to create a CHICS network

4.1.3 *Role of the Community*

Therefore, given the focus on the network of church, community, households, crèche and supporting organisations, the focus of the CHICS programme in the franchise model was not on the daycare or the child specifically but on the community or a network of actors who can work together. This is evident by the fact that the words “community” (103 and 25) were used more often than the words “crèche” (69 and 0) or “nursery” (23 and

o) or “teacher” (8 and 18) in, respectively, the Project Team Manual (Nova, 2011) and CHICS Officer’s Manual (Nova, 2010).

Initially, the crèche was seen as a meeting place for parents and community members to meet to improve their surroundings. For example, the focus of the programme was initially on assisting the households, as also indicated by the slogan of CHICS at the time: “Empowering households through children.” The Project Team Manual (Nova, 2011) states: “The way in which the CHICS programme starts off in a local community largely influences the eventual success thereof. Access to the community should not be taken for granted, and it is advisable to work with people or institutions that already have good trusting relationships in place.” In the CHICS Officer’s Manual (Nova, 2010), the CHICS Officer is advised to familiarise themselves with the community because that is where children and their households are based.

The local church could also help to give the CHICS Officer access to the community. The Project Team Manual (Nova, 2011) states: “From the start the local congregation is one of the most important role players in a CHICS programme. The local congregation already has established relationships in the local community. No meaningful work can be done without a good relationship with the local community and therefore close cooperation with the local congregation is very important.”

Further evidence of the importance of the church and community during the CHICS franchise model was the story of Reverend Mokoena. Reported in an internal document dated October 2016, Rev Mokoena orally told his story:

Kgautšwane is a deep rural area. It is a dry area, work is very scarce and most people are very poor. It is my first congregation, and I hope it will be my last. People here need hope, and where else will they get it if the church is not there for them?

CHICS is an empowering tool for my congregation. When I came here, I did not know the dynamics of the community. As time went on I became aware of the huge needs of the people but I did not know how to address them. This congregation has

many posts, some even miles away, and on Sundays I have to visit them. We have the Sunday school, but you find a child of 9-11 years old walking around in the street during the church services and school time.

You have to ask yourself why this happens. The child has parents, but some are ignorant. Ignorance is not intentional, it is part of their life, with hopelessness.

You have to ask yourself what we can do. So we started Amogelang (programme that gives children a meal, meaning “Be grateful”). CHICS came in with Amogelang. CHICS helped us to talk to the parents about needs. There are short-term needs, such as food and clothes, but there are long-term needs, such as education. Through CHICS, we network with parents and we can talk about needs in concrete ways. CHICS has helped us with that; we could not do it without CHICS. Parents dump their children at the Sunday school; they feel it is not their responsibility, but CHICS has helped us to involve the parents again.

Even the CHICS volunteers have developed a lot by being involved. Even myself, I was not aware of the concrete needs as set out by CHICS. You can preach a very good sermon, but people have needs, concrete needs, and how do you address that?² That is a challenge, and CHICS gives an answer to that question.

Our church was once accused of trying to kill other churches by being better than they are through these programmes. ... Even the schools felt we were a threat to them, and the social workers and the nurses were surprised that we attend to the needs of the children and we were not well received. I used the opportunity to talk to them, and they now see that we can help them and that we can work together. If you go to the social worker in her office, she cannot breathe. There are too many stacks of files, but they can see now that we can help them. We are also working with others; like HIV – the testing is now done here.

2 Editors' note: This is echoed in Chapter 13.

Development in the Anthropocene

CHICS helps to empower the ministry; it does a lot. When I came here, I did not think I will find child-headed households, the high rate of unemployment, and so on, and I did not know what to do. CHICS helped me to address these things..., but the hopelessness is going down, the level of knowledge of HIV is improving. I cannot do it through the preaching, ..., but the programmes address it weekly. I do not have time to educate the people about water, but CHICS has time to do it in the week.

Although advocating for the child is at the heart of the CHICS programme – the CHICS Officer’s Manual (Nova, 2010) states that the basic CHICS value is to always act in the child’s interest – the community served as a means of reaching the child rather than a crèche because CHICS feels that the home environment is the most crucial setting for early development. The Project Team Manual (Nova, 2011) states: “All children should have the opportunity to develop a good character, learn life skills, have sufficient food and water at their disposal and live and move in a healthy environment. First and foremost, the household is the place where children should be given these opportunities”. The idea was that through the relationship with the CHICS officer and other parents during parental empowerment meetings, parents could be empowered to improve their home environment, the Project Team Manual (Nova, 2011) states: “... bad decisions aggravate the (difficult home situations in low-income environments), for example where alcohol abuse and/or domestic violence occur. It is the goal of the CHICS programme to find ways to improve parents’ ability to offer their children a higher quality of life”.

4.1.4 *The role of the parents*

The monthly CHICS meetings for parents and community members provide the CHICS officer with their primary chance to meet and engage with parents. Parents may mingle and have a light dinner together at these gatherings. They also invite knowledgeable community guests to provide educational lectures on children and provide parents with the opportunity to contribute creatively by sharing their experiences with the group and the programme. The meetings are very important,

the Project Team Manual (Nova, 2011) states: “The parent empowerment group is a very important aspect of the CHICS programme because it is the medium whereby parents are encouraged to have better relationships with their children, where relationships between parents can be strengthened and where parents could be introduced to resources available in the community.”

4.1.5 Results of the Franchise Model

During a study with the ETH Zürich in 2021, researchers from Nova conducted a focus group at three daycare centres that have implemented the CHICS Franchise Model for several years. The focus groups highlighted the key role of the CHICS officer, particularly in fostering unity and empowerment amongst parents. One parent said, “We can thank (the CHICS officer), who leads us in a manner that makes us one. Yes, we are united.”

Through CHICS meetings, parents gained confidence, emotional support, and valuable knowledge and skills, enabling them to tackle poverty-related challenges. One parent said: “When CHICS came here, it found us empty, very empty and it gave us knowledge... We were empty in our minds, but it opened them and filled them with information that would help us tomorrow.”

These gatherings allowed parents to debate and act on crèche, community services and infrastructural concerns impacting their children. CHICS helped isolated parents to collaborate and communicate, building community and shared responsibility. One parent mentioned, as recorded internally in Nova: “CHICS found us separated and living our own lives and minding our own business as people, and it brought us together as parents and showed us that we could not live alone, but we need each other, so it made us one... we always knew that we have a water problem, but we just did not talk about it, why? I do not know, but in the CHICS meeting, we started to talk about water”.

4.2 The Principal Model

The Principal Model started to develop in 2019 because of the difficulties of working with local congregations. This was the second phase of the CHICS programme. In this model, the head teacher or principal is trained and empowered to implement the activities of CHICS in their own ECD centre instead of appointing a remunerated CHICS officer as the fieldworker like the social franchise model. At the time of writing, the CHICS Principal Model has been implemented in 15 ECD centres around Pretoria.

The first mention of what would become the Principal Model is in the Narrative Report (Nova, 2019): “The (resources), which we are currently developing, is designed with the early childhood development (ECD) practitioner as the main target user to facilitate the improvement of quality of life of children and transforming ECD centres as centres that drive quality of life improvement and engagements with communities and households.” In the new model, the teacher was trained and equipped with the necessary knowledge and, with guidance, could decide (contextualise) how to implement the training and knowledge at their ECD centres.

4.3 Moving towards ECD as the main partner

A report (Nova, 2019) to the funder states: “When developing CHICS, we have always believed that every local congregation would primarily qualify to become a CHICS franchisee. The experience we had from the CHICS pilot 2016–2018 emphasised that local congregations have their own dynamics depending on their leadership styles, experience and context.” In a previous report (Nova, 2017), it was mentioned that: “Social impact as a motivation to establish CHICS did not seem to be a good enough incentive for some local congregations: potential franchisees are also interested in a model with a business opportunity alongside the social impact”.

In the following year, the report (Nova, 2018) noted as a “lesson learnt” that the local congregation was too slow to make decisions, and while they reacted enthusiastically, they were slow to implement. The report stated: “There are long chains of

communication, decision-making and slow feedback from the local congregation resulting in instructions and guidelines being distorted and delayed as they proceed through multiple levels”; “local congregations’ representatives mostly showed a lot of enthusiasm and optimism about guidelines and ideas without sufficient efforts to act. We found it difficult to mitigate this challenge as CHICS depends on only one remunerated official; the rest of the local people are volunteers.”

It was also mentioned that the congregation is not necessarily the best partner for the CHICS programme in other reports (Nova, 2021): “However, it emerged from our engagements with the local congregations that we worked with... that the church is not the ideal partner to successfully scale the CHICS programme. This is mainly for the following reasons:

- It makes implementation unaffordable and unsustainable: It takes a lot of time to source the funds needed to remunerate a CHICS fieldworker from local businesses and/or the partner congregation, and it has often not been successful.
- The sustainability of the programme is uncertain because it is always linked to specific people in the congregation. The practical leadership style, approach and the activities of local congregations largely rely on the involvement of the members of the church who are appointed as office bearers. When they are replaced by others, the whole situation often changes. Continuity under the succeeding office bearers (often under the new leadership of the church) for the following years is never guaranteed.
- Lack of capacity for the potential driver of the programme implementation: In our experience, the minister of the church who initially expressed interest in establishing CHICS in their congregation does not always have enough capacity to implement or drive its implementation. Lack of their involvement does not always imply failure; however, it has a significant impact.
- The ECD centre is not a key concern in many local churches: The church is involved in many activities, some that are essential for their survival and some that they are dedicated

to. Most churches we had contact with have an ECD centre on their premises or in their buildings during the week, but that is often managed by the ECD staff, who are trained for their work.

4.4. The Emergence of Green CHICS

During the same period, the Green CHICS (GC) model was introduced, which is essentially the same as the principal model but with a larger focus on the environment. One of the reasons for the development of GC was to explore scalable models for CHICS. The idea was to combine environmental education and ECD outcomes to diversify funding streams and attract potential funders who would be interested in supporting the programme if environmental and ECD outcomes were realised. In the Narrative Report (Nova, 2023), GC is described as follows: “In pursuit of improving our marketing and expanding the impact of CHICS, we developed and launched a new focused sub-programme of CHICS, Green CHICS (GC) programme... GC is for parents and children to develop resilience against the effects of climate change. GC is a focused version of the full CHICS package that focuses on the environment. By embedding the brain-building environmental education programme supplement into ECD services, GC supports parents to create a home environment characterised by environmentally conscious interactions to adopt healthier and greener practices related to daily living.” (Nova, 2023)

Thus, the church was initially seen as a good partner in supporting children in low-income communities, but it later became clear that, while there is a lot of overlap between the mission of the church and the CHICS programme, early childhood development specifically is not the sole core mission of the church and when congregation members leave or are replaced in the leadership positions, the CHICS programme usually suffers or ends. The church also needs funds for its own operations, which made fundraising for CHICS a lesser concern. The CHICS programme became a supplement to existing ECD

centres, increasing family participation, agency, and teacher-parent interaction.

4.4.1 *Shifting the focus to early childhood development*

From 2017 to 2023, the use of the words “early childhood development” increased significantly in the investigated records and programme reports and terms referring to merely looking after children, but not necessarily educating them, such as “daycare centre” or “crèche” decreased. This could indicate that the movement from the franchise model to the principal model increased the focus on the education and development of children.

For example, Figure 19 shows the use of various terms in reports to funders, called “Narrative Reports” from 2017 to 2023. The left panel shows instances with the terms “teacher” or “principal”, and the right panel, with a different scale, shows instances without, to indicate changes more efficiently in the usage of the other terms. Use of “principal and teacher” increased significantly, “early childhood development” and “parent or caregiver” also increased somewhat, while church or congregation consistently decreased. This could be taken to scale and be sustainable. Several large funders are mostly interested and have a strong emphasis on ECD. Nova started working on proposals for some of these funders and received good attention and funding from Innovation Edge.

The move to partnering with professionals in the ECD sector was evident in the following year’s report (Nova, 2020): “The CHICS Programme’s first strategic plan for large-scale implementation has been based on the local franchise model. However, our thoughts have evolved during 2019 when we were developing the CHICS mobile application and during interactions with influential role players in the early childhood development (ECD) sector. We then began to see a complementary niche role for CHICS as an additional feature that can add value to existing ECD programmes. Our main finding then was that it would be valuable to further develop a complementary CHICS model in addition to the franchise model that we have been piloting. Since then, our focus and our approach of developing CHICS

has considered the further development of the implementation materials in such a way that they would be easily adaptable to be implemented by existing entities in the ECD sector”.

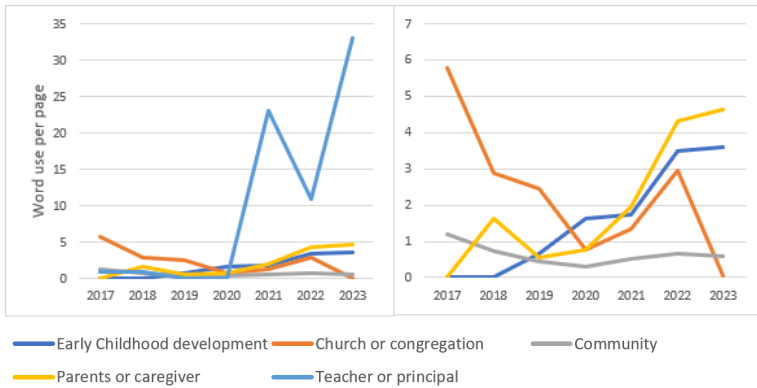


Figure 19: Word use per page in Narrative Reports from 2017 to 2023

4.5 Teachers’ and parents’ relationship

In the early initiative, the CHICS officer was external to the school and stood between the church-based childcare and the community. As it grew, the CHICS officer became a crucial figure between the ECD centre and parents, rather than being a community worker. This strategy improved parent-teacher connections. As the report (Nova, 2020) stated: “We now focus on the importance of the niche role of CHICS, which is to facilitate parental agency and reignite a sense of aspiration in grassroots or local civil society. The way in which we now present CHICS has led us to change our mission”; and “The initial mission of CHICS was ‘to develop and promote ways with households and networks to improve the quality of life of children’. As a result of identifying our niche role (which still requires some fine-tuning) our mission has been modified: ‘to contribute towards the building of relationships that improve the quality of life of households with children’. This is still conducted in close cooperation with the ECD centre, where the children’s curriculum is presented once a week and parents’

empowerment meetings once a month”; and lastly “Our focus broadened from doing our own thing with CHICS to also finding our place within the broader field of ECD”.

The increased cooperation between teachers and parents ensured increased synergy between what the child was exposed to at home and the ECD centre. One principal said: “When I talk to the parents about what we want to do, they say, yes, my child has already told me that... We thought they were too small, but now we tell them to do certain things, for example, to observe how water is used at home. Before you can put your bag down in class in the morning, they will say: ‘Teacher, my mother brushed her teeth while the water was running. I told her to close the tap, and she did so’.” (Nova, 2023).

The strengthened relationship with parents was very positive for the teachers. The Narrative Report (Nova, 2021) stated: “(the principals) mostly welcomed and applauded the positive relationships they have developed with the parents. Most of them were surprised by the fact that parents responded very well to attending the CHICS monthly meetings although they previously had poor attendance at their school meetings, they had to attend just four times a year (once per quarter). We also gained a good insight into how the parents and the ECD staff can work closer together in the education and care of the children”. In a subsequent report (Nova, 2022), it said: “Several principals mentioned that the more they engaged the parents, the more they came to realise that they had always needed some type of initiative such as CHICS to enable them to engage the parents meaningfully. When they have a positive relationship with parents, they can achieve even more things than before, and the platform that CHICS had created for them to meaningfully engage the parents was what they have always needed. Realising how CHICS can make things easier between them and the parents has sparked self-confidence and the need to participate”.

For the teacher to know the home environment is also important (Nova, 2023): “One principal mentioned that she was mostly interested in the fact that CHICS offers them an

opportunity to understand the household context of the child. She has always been concerned that, as principals, they do not know what happens at home that can affect the development of the children they work with. Therefore, if the ECD centres can get access to the lives of children at home to develop a working relationship with the primary caregivers of the children, then together, they can embark on a common journey to model the life they desire for the children. CHICS has enabled her to kick-start a working relationship with the parents and to gain access into the home life of a child because it is now easier to discuss the home issues that may influence the development and learning of the child”. In the Narrative Report (Nova, 2021) it is mentioned: “The young child’s most important relationship is with its parents and most important environment is the household context. From there, the child moves to the ECD centre. We are seeing in practice how both parents and children grow in their sense of agency and hope when they start working together and achieve – rather than receive – small successes”.

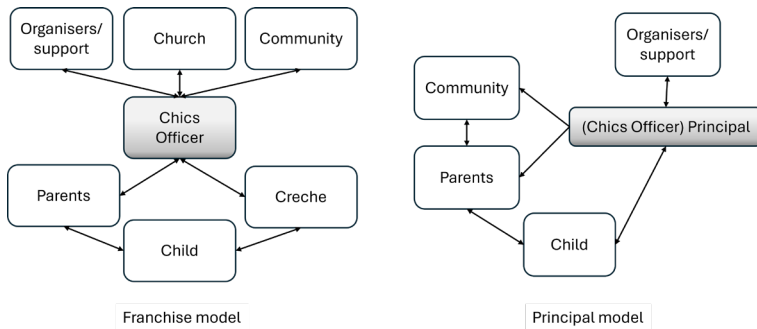


Figure 20: Relationship structure from franchise model to principal model

Figure 20 depicts the switch from franchise to principal model relationships between the CHICS officer and other role participants. The franchise concept centres on the CHICS officer, who connects various community actors or stakeholders to the parents and crèche. The principal model emphasises parent-ECD centre interactions. The CHICS officer works more closely with the children while they are in the ECD centre.

4.6 Parents' and children's relationships

Increased cooperation between parents and teachers also resulted in increased interaction between parents and children. One parent of Green CHICS said (Nova, 2023): “Before Green CHICS, I have never cooked with my children or played games with them. Now, they even ask me, ‘Mama when are we going to cook?’ One day, I peeled my potatoes, and I called her, I put two bowls on the table and asked her to pick up the chips one by one using her fingers only to put them into another bowl and back while she was reading (counting) one, two, three, four, ... she can even count up to forty. I could see that she enjoys herself, and I enjoy it, too. Now, I have downloaded many games and other educational things on my phone, and we play and read with my children a lot nowadays.”

Parents get advice and guidance on what their children need to develop and how they can do that at home. Narrative Report (Nova, 2023) states: “This is to say that, when the parents are empowered with reliable information, they can make informed decisions, and when they are provided with opportunities for viable implementation, they can implement those decisions. The result is activities that improve both quality of life and practical ECD learning and development, both at home and at the ECD centre.”

4.7 Interparental relationships and support

In the parent empowerment meetings, the parents met with each other, became friends, and supported each other. They shared knowledge about their children and development outcomes. This greatly increased parental agency: “We concluded that our niche role where we can add value in our ability to facilitate parents' agency to improve aspects of the quality of life of children. In 2020, we therefore focused on developing, strengthening, and promoting our niche, namely, to facilitate parents' agency” (Nova, 2021).

4.8 Cost-effectiveness

The principal model had the advantage that it was much more cost-effective: “We found this model more affordable and sustainable compared to the franchise model. Instead of recruiting and paying a CHICS fieldworker, the existing school principal is trained as the CHICS programme facilitator”; and “The success of the principal model in this project indicates that it has high potential for taking CHICS to scale on a relatively low budget. The teacher is a natural role player as a key between the ECD and the household, which is a strategic combination for improving the well-being of people and the environment on a local level” (Nova, 2021).

The principal model proved to be effective because the ECD centre is the central focus of the principal, unlike the church. One report (Nova, 2023) stated: “In the principal model we relied on the inner motivation of the principal to improve her ECD centre and to play a constructive role in the households of her children and the community. This has proved to be a good approach. We did not invest such a high level of capacity (both time and funding) as in the franchise model, but allowed the principals to take the lead and let things develop, with our constant support.”

5. Discussion

A document review and analysis was conducted to explore how the Community/Church Household Interface Care and Support (CHICS) programme empowered families to be agents in the development of their children. The qualitative analysis of CHICS programme reports reveals several key insights about the evolution and impact of this early childhood development initiative.

Throughout its evolution, CHICS maintained a focus on holistic child development, recognising the importance of home and ECD centre environments. The programme’s emphasis on quality-of-life improvements alongside educational outcomes reflects this comprehensive approach. The transition of the CHICS programme from a franchise

model, which heavily involved local congregations and community participation, to the principal model centred on ECD centres represents a strategic shift towards more direct engagement with children's primary learning environments and the professionals responsible for their early education. This evolution, as evidenced by the increased emphasis on terms such as "early childhood development" and "teacher/principal" in later reports, emphasises a more targeted approach aimed at enhancing learning outcomes and holistic development within the ECD centres.

Moving from a community-focused model to an ECD centre model carries several implications. Firstly, it indicates a deeper integration of the programme within the formal education system, emphasising the significance of early childhood education within structured learning environments. This transition enables a more concentrated effort to improve the quality of education and support provided to young children during their crucial formative years. Furthermore, the shift towards an ECD centre model may foster a more specialised and professionalised approach to early childhood development. By collaborating closely with trained educators and ECD professionals within the centres, the programme can utilise their expertise to deliver tailored interventions and support that align with best practices in early childhood education. By focusing on parents, families and ECD centres, the development of the child is enhanced (see Chikwanda et al., 2022; Luoto et al., 2020). This is a key strength of the CHICS programme and offers the following lessons:

1. A major strength of the CHICS programme is its ability to foster stronger connections between parents and ECD teachers or principals. By empowering principals to implement CHICS activities, the programme created natural bridges between homes and ECD centres. Reports indicate that principals welcomed improved relationships with parents, noting increased parental engagement and a better understanding of children's home contexts. In South Africa, where early childhood development is crucial for laying the foundation for children's future success,

stronger connections between parents and educators can ensure consistency in the child's learning experiences across home and educational settings (Blose & Muteweri, 2021; Chikwanda et al., 2022). This approach of connecting education and home is strongly advocated for globally (Arya et al., 2021; Bierman et al., 2017).

2. The CHICS programme consistently aimed to enhance parental agency in child development. The monthly parent empowerment meetings provided a platform for parents to gain knowledge, share experiences, and build supportive networks. Reports suggest that these meetings increased parents' confidence and ability to engage in developmental activities with their children at home. Strengthening the agency of parents and families in developing their children is a major strength of the CHICS programme and provides lessons in the following way: CHICS recognises parents as primary actors in their children's early development, not just passive recipients of services or advice; parents have continuous support and are provided with consistent information about the child and development and why children develop as they do; they are part of networks and peer support which is relatable; and most importantly, the development activities are extended into the home given that children spend the majority of their time there. Therefore, parents are more knowledgeable, informed and confident. This enhances parental agency in child development in the South African context. It not only strengthens family dynamics and community engagement but also empowers parents to play a more active and informed role in their children's early education, ultimately contributing to more inclusive, supportive, and effective early childhood development initiatives. Acknowledging and utilising the active role of parents can lead to more holistic and sustainable improvements in early childhood development (Coleman et al., 2023; Emmers et al., 2021).

As the CHICS programme evolved, there were other unintentional, either overt or covert, lessons which are worth noting:

- The CHICS programme has a holistic approach to child development by working through the ECD centres, strengthening parent capacity and flourishing child development. The programme, therefore, recognises the critical role of the home environment. This approach acknowledges that learning and development occur continuously in all settings of a child's life.
- Subsequently, by empowering parents with knowledge and skills, the long-term effects are sustained because networks are created and shared consistently and over time through the community and across generations. They can share this knowledge with other parents, relatives, or community members, creating a ripple effect. This approach potentially creates lasting change in the community's approach to child development beyond the direct scope of the CHICS programme.
- The CHICS programme embeds culture because it is culturally relevant and adaptable to local contexts. This is another major strength because child-rearing practices are deeply rooted in culture, locally relevant approaches are more likely to be adopted and maintained, and parents' existing knowledge and practices are respected and validated, which then avoids the pitfalls of imposing a one-size-fits-all model that may not agree with local cultures.
- While the CHICS programme embeds culture, it also addresses inequalities, especially in contexts where access to formal early childhood education might be limited. Empowering parents can help to bridge developmental gaps. Parents provide developmental support to their children, potentially reducing the developmental gap between children who attend formal ECD programmes and those who do not, and parents acquire tools to support their children's development regardless of their socioeconomic status.
- The CHICS programme empowers parents to engage in developmental activities at home and thereby makes it a cost-effective way to enhance child development outcomes. It therefore makes this a cost-effective way to reach children both in and out of an ECD centre.

5.1 Implications for scale

The CHICS programme is adaptable, as evidenced by moving from a franchise model to a principal model and later introducing the Green CHICS variant. This willingness to adapt, based on implementation experiences and stakeholder feedback, is a strength that bodes well for the programme's long-term sustainability and impact. There are a few points to consider if taking CHICS to scale:

- As stated previously, the CHICS programme is *cost-effective* because it uses existing infrastructure (buildings and equipment) and personnel (principals and teachers), thereby eliminating the need to build new facilities or hire additional full-time staff specifically for the programme. In terms of training, instead of training many community workers, the focus is on training ECD principals who are already professionals in child development, which makes it a targeted training approach and therefore more cost-effective by reducing training costs. Operational costs are also minimised because the CHICS activities are incorporated into regular operations in the ECD centres. Furthermore, the CHICS programme's reliance on external funding streams is reduced because there are existing funding streams in the ECD centres, which makes it more sustainable. By training principals to run the programme, there is increased local ownership,
- Taking the CHICS programme to *scale* means that CHICS has the potential to reach many children and families quickly because South Africa has an existing network of ECD centres across the country. Accessing and working through the existing network means (a) a more standardised implementation of the programme across different locations and making it easier to scale up while maintaining quality; (b) facilitating rapid scaling if the model is proven effective and adopted by others; (c) reducing the logistical challenges of setting up new programme sites; (d) allowing for some flexibility in implementation making it potentially adaptable to urban, rural and different socioeconomic contexts. The CHICS programme offers an integrated approach that

strengthens connections between ECD centres, families, and communities.

6. Conclusion

The CHICS programme creates the opportunity for the ECD centre-based interventions to effectively serve as hubs for parent engagement and empowerment. By empowering existing ECD professionals to implement holistic development programmes, a more sustainable programme is possible that does not rely on external facilitators. Parents flourish because they have meetings and activities which significantly enhance parental agency and home-based developmental practices. The CHICS programme demonstrates the potential of integrated, adaptable approaches to early childhood development that empower ECD professionals and parents. Its evolution offers valuable lessons for policymakers and practitioners seeking to enhance early childhood outcomes in resource-constrained environments.

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