

THE GATHERING 2025

How investing in early childhood development sets up children for a lifetime of success



📷 Rachel Kolisi, Grace Matlhabe and Kentse Radebe at the Daily Maverick's Gathering 2025. (Photo: David Harrison)

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'We have to change our minds completely about what matters in education. The investment in early education is about at most 5% of the government budget, and yet your best returns are in the first five years,' says SmartStart founder Grace Matlhape.

"In the end, if we are serious about focusing on the future rather than the past, early education is the best opportunity we have to actually make sure that we do something about children's future," says SmartStart founder Grace Matlhape.



Grace Matlhape at Daily Maverick's The Gathering 2025. (Photo: David Harrison)

Matlhape was speaking on Thursday, 28 August 2025, at [The Gathering](https://events.dailymaverick.co.za/events/2025/08/28/the-gathering-2025-changemakers-impact-edition?_gl=1%2A1yhuvjx%2A_gcl_au%2AMTY3NTY5MzQyOC4xNzUxNDY1MDY4%2A_ga%2AMTU2MTAxMDEoMS4xNzUz) ([https://events.dailymaverick.co.za/events/2025/08/28/the-gathering-2025-changemakers-impact-edition?](https://events.dailymaverick.co.za/events/2025/08/28/the-gathering-2025-changemakers-impact-edition?_gl=1%2A1yhuvjx%2A_gcl_au%2AMTY3NTY5MzQyOC4xNzUxNDY1MDY4%2A_ga%2AMTU2MTAxMDEoMS4xNzUz)

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The panel focused on critical issues facing education in South Africa, focusing on innovation, equity and the battle for every child's potential. It addressed the importance of early childhood development (ECD) as foundational for lifelong learning and breaking cycles of poverty and inequality.

The foundational battleground

Research shows 90% of brain development happens during the first five years of life, making ECD South Africa's best investment in human capital.

Despite formal recognition of ECD through legislation such as the Basic Education Laws Amendment Act, about 66% of children in poor households still lack access to quality early education.

Matlhape said early learning ensures children reach their full potential. In South Africa, many children start life unequally due to limited access to prenatal care and poverty, which only worsens educational disparities. Although recent policy changes recognise early education's importance, only a small fraction of education budgets is allocated to this developmental stage.

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“We have to change our minds completely about what matters in education. The investment in early education is about at most 5% of the government budget, and yet your best returns are in the first five years. We have to change all of that. We have to change our mindsets about what matters,” she said.



Daily Maverick's Zukiswa Pikoli at The Gathering 2025. (Photo: David Harrison)

Pikoli highlighted sobering statistics from the DG Murray Trust Zero Dropout Campaign that four out of ten children who start Grade 1 in South Africa do not complete their schooling. The critical issue is that young people who drop out or don't complete matric are far less likely to access higher education or training opportunities in South Africa, leading to higher unemployment rates during their most productive years.



Deputy CEO of the DG Murray Trust Kentse Radebe at Daily Maverick's The Gathering 2025. (Photo: David Harrison)

“This inability to contribute economically to their families is a devastating cycle we must break. That's why, while we invest across different levels, prioritising early childhood development is essential to effectively disrupt the intergenerational cycle of poverty,” said Radebe.

Feeding tummies, feeding minds

Pikoli pointed out that nutrition played a critical role in early childhood development, as adequate nourishment was essential for healthy brain growth and overall physical development. However, in a country where a significant portion of the population faced food insecurity, this link was often overlooked. The panellists highlighted that proper nutrition, combined with early learning opportunities, was vital for breaking cycles of poverty and unlocking children's full potential.

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Rachel Kolisi at Daily Maverick's The Gathering 2025. (Photo: David Harrison)

Kolisi said that over the past five years, her work with the Kolisi Foundation had been deeply rooted in community engagement.

She has spent extensive time listening, learning and understanding local needs, alongside ongoing research and data analysis.

Read more: [Hope rises: How one school is redefining education for kids from Cape Town's poorest communities](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-06-10-christel-house-where-poverty-doesnt-limit-potential/) (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-06-10-christel-house-where-poverty-doesnt-limit-potential/>)

“Our approach combined support for after-school tutoring for older children with strong early childhood development initiatives. Building on Grace’s (Matlahpe) point about the critical role of brain development and nutrition, we implemented comprehensive nutrition programmes in all the schools we supported. This was vital because children who expend more energy need proper nourishment to sustain their learning and growth,” srahe said.

Kolisi said an important, but often overlooked factor was the impact of trauma, especially on young children’s brains, and how it affected their ability to learn and develop as fully rounded human beings. She said the Kolisi foundation had focused its efforts not only on education, but also on addressing gender-based violence, food security and sport.

Parents as a cornerstone

The panel highlighted the essential role parents played as their children’s first educators and as foundational pillars in early childhood development.

All panellists agreed that love, play, and meaningful communication at home established the confidence, identity and emotional security that children needed to thrive.

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Parental involvement is not limited to early learning years, but extends throughout a child’s educational journey, helping them overcome challenges and succeed in school. Despite the heavy social and economic pressures many families face, such as high unemployment and single-parent households, active and engaged parents provide critical support.

The panellists underscored that empowering parents through information, training and community-based support was vital in ensuring that no child was left behind, reinforcing the idea that education truly begins at home and requires a strong partnership between families, schools, and communities.

The panel closed with a reminder that education was not merely about academic achievement, but about building confident, resilient individuals who could contribute to society. It required bold shifts in policy, substantial investments – particularly in the early years – and genuine collaboration across sectors. The future of South Africa hinged on this battle for every child’s potential. **DM**

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KP 29 August 2025 at 08:13 (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-08-28-how-investing-in-early-childhood-development-sets-up-children-for-a-lifetime-of-success/#comment-15631894>)


This is the stuff we really need to be getting right if we want to see South Africa thrive in the future. The issues at tertiary education level are important, but will never be solved unless we prioritize the first five years.


Michele Rivarola 29 August 2025 at 09:25 (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-08-28-how-investing-in-early-childhood-development-sets-up-children-for-a-lifetime-of-success/#comment-15632052>)


The three RRRs back to basics. Maths literacy starts at preprimary school which is where state resources have been most removed from. In countries such as India unless you achieve good maths competence you are not allowed to enroll into further studies after matric. In SA rather than strengthening weak links we weaken strong links which is why we are one of the worst countries in Africa when it comes to maths literacy


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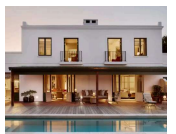
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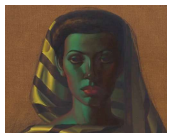
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