

Rooted and Resilient: Leadership, Networks, and Sustainability in Knysna's ECD Centres

Learning Brief
October 2025

Early childhood development (ECD) centres in Knysna survive and grow because of the dedication of their principals. These leaders do far more than run schools — they feed children, support families, and hold their communities together through care, resourcefulness, and persistence.

This brief shares what we've learned from our recent interviews with 16 principals from KET-supported centres across Knysna. These principals represent a wide mix of centres — large and small, new and long-established, registered and unregistered — all working in a complex, under-resourced system.

The interviews show how strong relationships and community leadership keep ECD centres going, but also how much more support is needed to turn resilience into lasting quality for children.

What makes some centres thrive?

The Positive Deviance Study found that centres that do well, even under difficult conditions, usually:

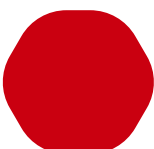
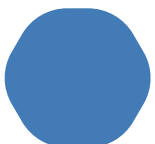
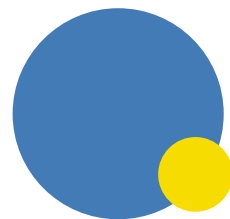
- Are deeply rooted in their communities
- Have strong relationships with parents and families
- Have committed, caring leaders
- Build a culture of teamwork and learning

This led to key questions:

What helps principals show these strengths?

How does their leadership affect quality and sustainability?

Where can support make the biggest difference?



What we found

Leadership is built on trust

Principals rely more on relationships and community support than on rules or compliance.

Resilience doesn't always mean quality

Strong networks help centres survive, but they don't automatically improve children's learning.

Partnerships make a difference

NGOs such as KET help connect centres and turn isolated efforts into shared strength.

Exploring Roots and Resilience

Why principals do this work

Most principals started their centres because they saw a need in their communities — not because they planned to be administrators. Many describe their work as a calling, sustained by prayer, hope, and determination.

Their focus is caring for children, not paperwork, but they face major challenges:

- Ongoing financial strain
- Heavy administrative and regulatory demands
- Staff shortages and stress
- Low or uncertain parent contributions
- Emotional and physical exhaustion

How they manage financially

Even with subsidies, few centres fully cover their costs. Principals keep going through:

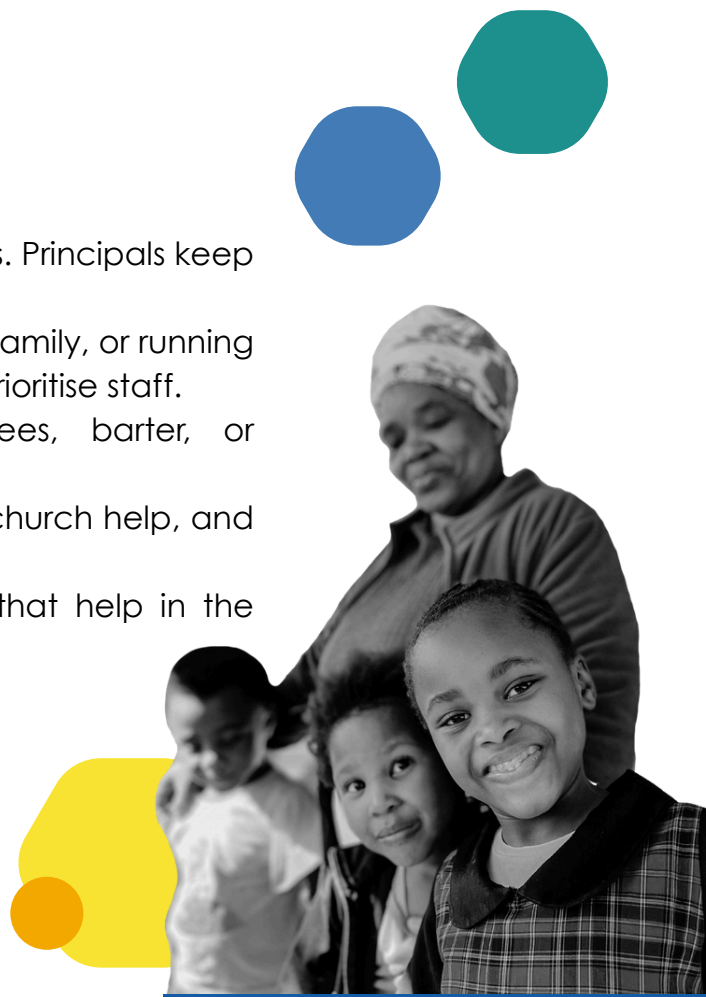
- Personal sacrifice: using savings, borrowing from family, or running side businesses; often skipping their own pay to prioritise staff.
- Flexibility with parents: accepting partial fees, barter, or volunteering to help to keep children enrolled.
- Community support: relying on food donations, church help, and small business contributions.
- Small fundraisers: holding food sales or raffles that help in the short term.

What adaptive leadership looks like

Principals constantly juggle challenges. They:

- Improvise under pressure
- Mobilise their networks for help
- Manage staff crises
- Respond to emergencies
- Resolve social tensions with empathy

Trust is at the heart of their work. Principals build it through daily presence, fairness, and open communication. Centres with trusting relationships tend to have stronger parent engagement — more than any other factor such as size or age.



The power of networks

Centres differ in how connected they are:

- Dense networks: strong, regular ties to NGOs, churches, parents, and local groups.
- Medium networks: limited but active support, often from family and one or two organisations.
- Sparse networks: dependent on one donor or family, leaving them vulnerable to shocks.

Some patterns stand out:

- A long history doesn't guarantee strong connections — outreach does.
- Church ties often provide both moral and material support.
- Centres with more connections handle crises better.
- Leadership, not location, determines how well a centre is networked.

KET's role: The hub-and-spoke model

KET acts as a hub, connecting ECD centres to feeding schemes, compliance help, training, and peer networks.

This system builds resilience and shared learning — but large-scale financial and infrastructure investment is still missing.



Key Insight: Networks help centres survive, but survival is not the same as transformation. Strong leadership and relationships create stability, yet without proper funding and investment, even the most connected centres remain fragile.

What principals advise new leaders

When asked what advice they would give to someone starting an ECD centre, the principals shared clear, heartfelt lessons:

- Start small and grow slowly. Use what you have and build over time.
- Build relationships. No centre can thrive in isolation — strong ties with parents, churches, and other ECDs are key.
- Keep learning. Seek out training, mentorship, and support.
- Lead with honesty and empathy. Do it for the children, not for profit.
- Be patient. Growth and stability take time and perseverance.

Their advice reminds us that ECD leadership is not about technical compliance but about commitment, relationships, and compassion.

What principals hope for

Principals shared their hopes and needs for the future:

- Better buildings: safer classrooms, proper kitchens, secure play areas.
- Financial stability: enough funding to pay staff and feed children without constant fundraising.
- More inclusion: the ability to serve more children, including those with disabilities.
- Quality learning: improved materials, training, and support for school readiness.
- Simpler compliance: help to achieve and maintain registration and subsidies.
- Stronger teams: lower staff turnover and ongoing professional development.

How to support them

There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but three main areas of support emerged from the study.

Leadership support and capacity building

Principals need continuous, practical training and mentoring tailored to their realities — not one-off workshops.

Support should include:

- Training on administration, curriculum, financial management, and crisis response
- Peer-learning forums and reflection spaces (WhatsApp groups, meetings, mentoring)
- Emotional and wellbeing support to reduce burnout

Strengthening networks

KET's hub-and-spoke model provides essential backbone support. Strengthening it further can reduce isolation and promote learning.

Key actions include:

- Mentorship between experienced and newer centres
- Parent engagement tools and community events
- Links with churches, community organisations, and local businesses for ongoing moral and material support

Responsive and flexible resources

Centres need small, fast, and flexible forms of support such as:

- Emergency micro-grants for food, repairs, or sudden crises
- Shared resource pools (books, food, maintenance help)
- Hands-on help with compliance, registration, and reporting



From survival to sustainability

KET's recent work — including standardised lesson plans, training, and coaching linked to school-readiness results — marks a shift from survival towards intentional quality.

With continued investment and collaboration, the remarkable resilience of Knysna's ECD principals can become the foundation for lasting quality and sustainability — ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive.

To read the full paper, download this report and click [here](#)