



KNYSNA
EDUCATION TRUST

Preschool Area Leads — Bringing Consistent Mentorship to ECD Programmes

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Learning Brief
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Knysna Education Trust (KET) partners with 67 Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in and around Knysna. KET has provided regular training and resources to its partner centres over several years, but it became evident that one-off interventions were not sufficient to achieve sustained improvements in quality. Practitioners often felt overwhelmed and unsupported, especially when trying to apply new ideas without in-person modelling or encouragement. The Preschool Area Lead (PAL) strategy was introduced to fill this gap; offering consistent, relational, on-site mentoring to small groups of schools. Rather than inspect or manage, PALs walk alongside principals and teachers to reinforce training, troubleshoot challenges, and build both confidence and resilience.

While each PAL has an allocated group of 10 – 12 ECD centres, they're not expected to work in isolation. Teamwork is encouraged, and PALs may assist at other centres when needed; as long as communication is clear. This flexible approach ensures no school is left behind and promotes shared learning across the team. PALs also serve as a central link between schools and KET departments like Adopt a Child's Education, Registration and Blocks for Growth. As the organisation expanded, principals and teachers began feeling overwhelmed by multiple visits from different KET teams. The PAL role helped to streamline communication and reduce this pressure; becoming a trusted, informed messenger for the full scope of KET's support.



A day in the life of a PAL: How it all comes together

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A PAL's work is informed by observation, data and relationships. Before visits, they consider:

- Observations from prior visits
- Teacher self-assessment rubric scores
- Classroom observation data (ELOM LPQA) and Child development results from ELOM and OPTIMA assessments
- Any school-specific concerns flagged by KET staff, principals or teachers
- Specific needs for resources
- Concerns about infrastructure that may affect the health and safety of learners and staff

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Equipped with this insight, the PAL sets out to visit the school; often carrying:

- Printed lesson plans
- Resources like mirrors, puzzles, powder paint, project glue etc.
- Donations from the community
- Communication from our School Readiness Programme, Adopt a Childs Education, Registration or Blocks for Growth programmes
- Recyclables which were collected by our Volunteers for art projects related to the lesson plans

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On-site, the PAL typically:

- Greets the principal first and checks in with all staff; even the cook and cleaning personnel
- Observes classrooms and provides real-time coaching or affirmation
- Models teaching techniques, classroom setup, or routines as needed
- Reinforces the use of KET's lesson plans, which support all developmental areas through structured, play-based learning
- Reflects with the teacher after the session, affirming what went well and identifying one or two practical next steps
- Does informal infrastructure and playground checks to ensure safety
- Monitor meal times to ensure children are served nutritious food

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After the visit, PALs:

- Log their visit on Salesforce
- Document observations using their diaries and plan strategies for improvements
- Feed key insights into the Educational team to inform planning and training
- Provide feedback to the rest of the team regarding their programmes/new developments at the sites
- Teachers are encouraged to reflect on PAL input and try new approaches before the next visit, creating a rhythm of growth and accountability

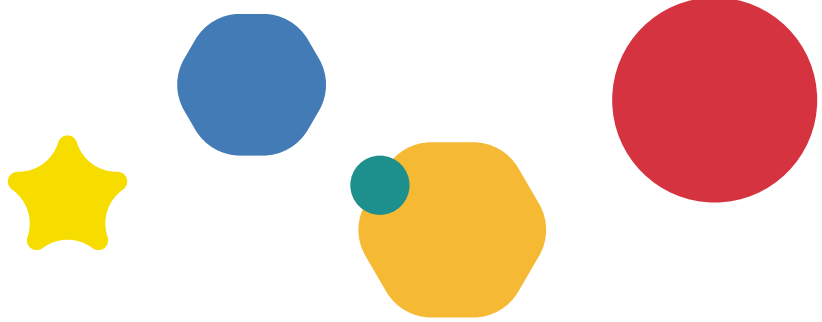
A message from one of our Principals: "I want to thank our PAL; she always enters our school with a friendly attitude and checks in with each teacher, asking if we are okay and if everything is going well. She makes sure we have our lesson plans so we can do our work with the children. She even checks in on our chef and is always kind. Thank you for showing us how to use our lesson plans. We're so grateful for the puzzles, dolls, and all the other learning materials you give us. The workshops help us so much. You are the best. We always look forward to the next lesson plan!"





Experience on the ground: What we've observed and felt

What stood out almost immediately was the humanising effect of the PAL role. Teachers began to see the PAL not as someone coming to inspect or police but as someone who listens, encourages, and brings ideas they can use right away. Trust was built slowly, but strongly.

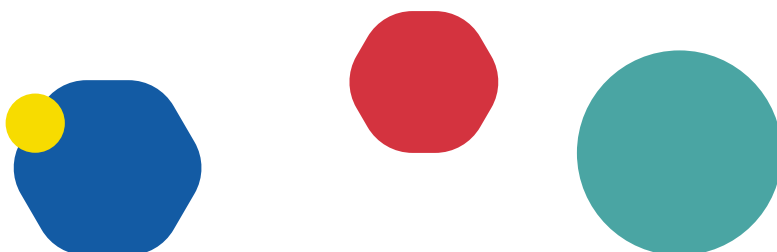


What worked well, and why

- Targeted support where it's needed most: We've prioritised increased, on-site mentoring for schools where teacher rubric scores are low, and where OPTIMA and ELOM data indicate children are not meeting developmental milestones. In classrooms with limited or misaligned teaching practices, PALs offer focused support, modelling, and guidance to uplift teaching quality; ensuring that all children access the learning they deserve.
- Relational trust: Teachers feel safe to ask questions, reflect, and try new approaches when supported by someone who listens and encourages rather than inspects.
- In-context coaching: Seeing strategies modelled in their own space helped teachers bring training to life in practical ways.
- Consistent visit schedules: Timetabled visits built momentum and allowed PALs to dedicate more time to schools needing deeper support.
- Two-way learning: PALs learned from teachers too, adapting their coaching based on real site contexts.
- Bi-monthly workshops: Collaborative workshops helped teachers grow in confidence and understanding, especially through practical engagement with lesson plans.
- Language and location mapping: Schools were assigned to PALs with language and location in mind, improving communication and travel efficiency.

What didn't work, and why

Overloaded PALs: A single PAL supporting more than 12 schools limited meaningful engagement. This has since been addressed through the appointment of additional PALs.



Lessons learned and what we're doing differently



Timely intervention: End-of-year ELOM screenings made follow-up difficult. By introducing the OPTIMA tools, we can now identify concerns earlier and support both teachers and parents with five months of targeted intervention before Grade 1.



Curriculum balance: Earlier emphasis on only Numba and Fonix programmes left gaps in motor and social-emotional development. These and other areas of development are now integrated into our holistic lesson plans.



From delivery to mentorship: The role of PALs has shifted from logistical support to meaningful mentorship, ensuring lesson plans are implemented with purpose and confidence.



PAL wellness: Regular reflection sessions offer PALs space to recharge and share challenges, protecting their emotional wellbeing.



Linking insight to design: ELOM and OPTIMA results, as well as PAL feedback is used to shape training and programme decisions; making sure real classroom needs drive system-wide improvements.

Final Thought

The PAL strategy is more than a staffing model. It's a philosophy of presence, proximity, and trust. It brings development into the everyday; where teachers grow, children thrive, and support is real. Real change in education doesn't come from toolkits alone. It comes through people — one classroom, one teacher, one child at a time.



K.E.T.