

THE EARLY YEARS EDIT

RESEARCH • DEVELOPMENT • DISCOVERY • INSPIRATION

VOL. 01 • INAUGURAL EDITION

TUESDAY, 13 OCTOBER 2026

SOUTH AFRICA

THE WEEK'S BIG QUESTION / SOUTH AFRICA

Are We Teaching Children Too Much, Too Soon?

New South African research challenges the assumption that formal instruction at younger ages necessarily delivers better long-term learning.

01 / SOUTH AFRICA / 22
SEPTEMBER 2026

Early learning and later maths achievement

A study analysing TIMSS 2023 data examined the relationship between early learning experiences and Grade 5 mathematics achievement.

Developmentally appropriate early education, longer programme participation and frequent home numeracy activities were positively associated with attainment. Very early enrolment and premature formal instruction were negatively associated with achievement.

WHY IT MATTERS: Earlier formal instruction is not automatically better. These observational results do not establish causation.

[READ \[01\]](#) ↗

02 / ENGLAND / 16
SEPTEMBER 2026

Reasoning improves maths progress

A randomised evaluation involving 6,291 pupils in 238 schools found a structured mathematical reasoning programme helped six- and seven-year-olds make around one additional month of progress.

Children eligible for free school meals made around two additional months of progress. Activities emphasised objects, discussion and explaining mathematical relationships.

WHY IT MATTERS: Ask children to explain their thinking, not only calculate. Results should not be extrapolated automatically to preschool.

[READ \[02\]](#) ↗

03 / DEVELOPMENT / 16
SEPTEMBER 2026

What late-talking toddlers reveal

Researchers compared 21 typically developing toddlers with 21 late-talking toddlers aged 18–35 months and found differing relationships between language skills and temperament.

Among late talkers, larger expressive vocabularies were associated with stronger attention and inhibitory control.

WHY IT MATTERS: Consider communication within overall development. The small study is not a diagnostic tool or proof of cause.

[READ \[03\]](#) ↗

The Research Desk

Four developments shaping early childhood practice, from statutory guidance and oral language to African-language learning.

In the News

ORIGINAL RESEARCH • EVALUATION • POLICY

04 / ENGLAND / 1 SEPTEMBER 2026

A revised EYFS framework

England updated its Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework, clarifying safeguarding and welfare requirements. Changes address safer sleep, screen use, recruitment checks and other responsibilities.

WHY IT MATTERS: Protea can draw safeguarding lessons from the guidance. The EYFS is statutory in England; it is not South African law.

[READ \[04\]](#) ↗

05 / PROGRAMME EVALUATIONS / 15 JULY 2026

Three programmes, encouraging results

Independent evaluations reported that NELI Preschool produced roughly two additional months of oral-language progress, while Talking Time produced around one additional month.

Emotion Coaching produced small positive effects on practitioner-rated self-regulation and prosocial behaviour.

WHY IT MATTERS: Language-rich interactions and adult support for emotional understanding deserve attention. Effects apply to the tested programmes, not automatically to similar activities.

[READ \[05\]](#) ↗

06 / AFRICA / 1 JULY 2026

The languages children bring to class

Research on Grade R African-language development examined the promise of play-based approaches and highlighted limited resources, parental preferences for English and gaps in practitioner training.

The authors advocated culturally relevant games, stronger practitioner preparation and family involvement.

WHY IT MATTERS: An African-contextualised curriculum is more than a translation of an English-language framework. Children's home languages and cultural experiences matter.

[READ \[06\]](#) ↗

07 / RESEARCH WATCH / 29 SEPTEMBER 2026

New funding for under-fives research

The Education Endowment Foundation and England's Department for Education announced a partnership worth up to £9.3 million for research involving children younger than five.

Priorities include language, development before age two, emotional development, transitions and early mathematics.

WHY IT MATTERS: These are important topics for future Protea curriculum reviews. Research funding is not evidence that an intervention already works.

[READ \[07\]](#) ↗

The Reading Room

Ideas worth opening, discussing and developing into original Protea Education articles.

Blogs Worth Reading

FOUR CURRENT ARTICLES

08 / EARLY EDUCATION / 10 SEP 2026

Culture and Belonging in the Early Years

Carla Cornelius explores family culture, belonging and the risk of reducing children to cultural labels.

[OPEN BLOG \[08\]](#) ↗

09 / EEF / 21 SEP 2026

Seeing the Learner: Inclusive Teaching

Corinne Settle explains observing individual needs and adapting teaching rather than making assumptions from diagnostic labels.

[OPEN BLOG \[09\]](#) ↗

10 / THE LITTLE GYM SA / 1 SEP 2026

Growing Through Play

Speech-language practitioners offer practical ways to encourage children's communication through movement and playful interactions.

[OPEN BLOG \[10\]](#) ↗

11 / FOUNDATION YEARS / SEP 2026

EYFS Changes: What Do They Mean?

A practitioner-facing account of the revised framework's safeguarding expectations, including safer sleep and screen use.

[OPEN BLOG \[11\]](#) ↗

The Protea Blog Desk

FOUR ORIGINAL ARTICLE PITCHES

PITCH 01 / PARENTS & PRACTITIONERS

The Problem With Teaching Children Too Much, Too Soon

Use the South African mathematics study to distinguish appropriate early challenges from premature formal instruction. Explain the limits of the evidence.

PITCH 02 / EDUCATORS & CURRICULUM DESIGNERS

The African Child and the International Classroom

Explore how global teaching frameworks can guide practice while respecting home languages, family relationships, culture and resources.

PITCH 03 / PARENTS, NANNIES & PRESCHOOL STAFF

Before Children Can Write, What Must They Learn?

Explain fine-motor coordination, visual-motor integration and early mark-making without treating developmental timelines as rigid deadlines.

PITCH 04 / PARENTS & CARE PROFESSIONALS

Connection Before Correction: Understanding Behaviour

Introduce emotional co-regulation and responsive relationships, with everyday examples of maintaining clear boundaries.

Research Into Practice

An evidence-informed learning activity to adapt for local early-years classrooms, followed by the editor's view.

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICAL ACTIVITY

The Little Market

AGES 4-6 | EARLY NUMERACY, LANGUAGE & REASONING

Create a pretend market using familiar items: fruit, baskets, clean empty food containers and reusable packaging.

Invite children to sort objects, compare quantities, distribute items and explain their decisions. Model counting in meaningful situations without making speed or rote recall the goal.

Welcome children's responses through speech, gestures, demonstrations and home languages.

- “How do you know which basket has more?”
- “Can we share these equally?”
- “What happens if we add another apple?”

Observe, don't diagnose

Notice one-to-one correspondence, comparison, explanation, communication and turn-taking. These are opportunities to observe learning, not a clinical developmental assessment.

Inspired by evidence-informed mathematical reasoning approaches; not a replication of the programme evaluated in source [02].
RELATED STUDY [02] ↗

From the Editor

LOOKING TOWARD THE PROTEA STANDARD

Development must guide instruction

Children benefit from thoughtful challenges. Earlier formal academic work is not necessarily better; relevant evidence must be interpreted with care.

Relationships are part of teaching

Responsive adult support, purposeful conversation and emotional understanding deserve explicit places in professional development.

Context matters

International evidence can be useful, but South African education must account for home languages, culture, family relationships, resource realities and local requirements.

A standard worth defining

The objective is not to reproduce a foreign framework. It is to develop a clearly articulated, evidence-informed approach with meaningful assessment and transparent quality assurance.

Sources & Further Reading

Original studies, official guidance, independent evaluations and professional articles referenced throughout this issue. Links are clickable in the PDF and printed in full.

Reference Directory

SOURCES 01–11

[01]

South African early learning and Grade 5 mathematics

Mokgwathi, M. S. | African Journal of Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education | 22 Sep 2026

<https://journals.co.za/doi/10.1080/18117295.2026.2678643>

[03]

Language and temperament in late-talking toddlers

Simmons et al. | American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology | 16 Sep 2026

https://pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/2026_AJSLP-26-00035

[05]

Early-years evaluations: NELI Preschool, Talking Time, Emotion Coaching

Education Endowment Foundation | 15 Jul 2026

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/programmes-boost-young-childrens-development>

[07]

New Best Start in Life research funding

Education Endowment Foundation | 29 Sep 2026

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/eef-to-accelerate-early-years-evidence-work>

[09]

Seeing the learner: inclusive teaching

Corinne Settle | Education Endowment Foundation | 21 Sep 2026

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/seeing-the-learner-inclusive-teaching>

[11]

EYFS changes from September 2026

Foundation Years | Sep 2026

<https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/2026/09/eyfs-changes-from-september-2026-what-do-they-mean-for-settings/>

[02]

Mathematical reasoning trial for six- and seven-year-olds

Education Endowment Foundation | 16 Sep 2026

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/trial-finds-teaching-reason-about-maths-boosts-attainment>

[04]

Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework

UK Department for Education | updated 1 Sep 2026

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>

[06]

Promoting African languages through play-based learning

Venketsamy & Strauss | Perspectives in Education | 1 Jul 2026

<https://journals.co.za/doi/10.38140/pie.v44i2.8999>

[08]

Culture and belonging in the early years

Carla Cornelius | Early Education | 10 Sep 2026

<https://early-education.org.uk/culture-and-belonging-early-years/>

[10]

Growing Through Play

Caterpillar Speech and Language Therapy | The Little Gym South Africa | 1 Sep 2026

<https://www.thelittlegym.co.za/2026/09/01/growing-through-play-by-caterpillar-speech-and-language-therapy/>