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AUTHOR Atmore, Eric; And Others  
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ABSTRACT

Noting that disadvantaged communities in South Africa can be empowered by involving parents and communities in the development of preschool education programs, this report presents the achievements of South Africa's Early Childhood Education and Care (educare) programs. Educare aims to develop the young child's potential to be a meaningful part of the social, economic, and cultural community. The report describes how the community, parental involvement, and empowerment serve as elements in community development. The rural environment in which the Educare teams work is also described. The next part of the report explains the Educare development process and phases of development, which include educare training; localized study groups; community organizational training; appropriate technology; nutrition, health, and safety needs assessment; parent education programs; junior primary teacher support programs; and basic adult education. The paper concludes by noting that communities as a united force have the right and the responsibility to demand participation in political, educational, cultural, and collective activities. Contains 23 references. (AP)

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## COMMUNITY AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT - THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

by

ERIC ATMORE  
RENE KING  
NIKKI FLORENCE

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Early childhood education and care (educare) is universally recognised for its concern with the most important foundation years, devoted to the allround development of the young child's potential. The particular merit of early childhood education is that it aims to meet the developmental needs of the young child in such a way that he/she can become a meaningful part of the social, economic and cultural community. At the same time it is commonly acknowledged that communities and parents see educare as a means of reducing the risk factors surrounding their children's development. They know the risks inherent in their environment and see educare as a way out. Concern about the needs of young children often provides a starting point for community organisation and development.

It is our thesis that where early childhood development programmes are people centred it can be a catalyst for the development of individuals, groups and communities; it can be a stimulus for personal growth; and the mobilisation of disadvantaged communities can be initiated or significantly aided by involving parents and communities in the development and running of preschool educare programmes.

Disadvantage means to have fewer options and choices, to have limited access to resources and limited opportunities. Disadvantaged communities are characterised by low levels of education, low levels of skill, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, lack of resources and a sense of powerlessness. In this context the provision of educare services without accompanying training and acquisition of skills by the parents and wider community, is questioned. Where there is no empowerment of the wider community then the long-term survival of educare programmes is threatened. Indeed, as has been pointed out

*'To be disadvantaged means above all, to have limited control over one's life...It is only when individuals and communities are able to gain control over their lives, when they are able to exercise choices and take decisions for themselves that effective change of their own and their children's life situation becomes feasible. Thus it is only through the empowerment of the disadvantaged that disadvantage itself can be overcome.'* (Govender, 1987: 4)

There have been attempts to devise strategies to meet the needs of disadvantaged young children. Most often these have been undertaken in isolation from the wider community and have usually focused on one form of educare provision only. The planning and implementation of preventive and promotive measures to counteract the environmental disadvantages presents a challenge to educare workers. An approach to addressing this problem is by increasing the capacity of people to deal with their educare needs.

The summary report of the seventh Southern Africa Seminar of the van Leer Foundation states that

*'...the provision of adequate care and educational services for disadvantaged under-fives is essential, and creative thinking is required to harness all available resources to this end. Furthermore, the importance of parent participation and community involvement in educational programmes for young children has been re-emphasised in recent years ... Those in favour of alternative models and programmes recognise that the family is the first and most influential*

*educational agent in the child's life, particularly during the early years, and also that preschool programmes can play an important role in community development.'*

(ELRU 1984: 12)

## **ELEMENTS IN COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

### **THE COMMUNITY**

Short (1988: 1) in a paper reviewing preschool needs and provision briefly mentions that strategies for the provision of services for preschool children must take into consideration the needs of the whole child within the context of the family and community development, and that these needs differ within and between communities. She suggests, that what one might be looking at is a complex interlocking of strategies designed to mobilise as many resources as possible to meet the varied needs of as many children as possible, but this process must involve a wide range of people who are concerned about the needs of young children, including parents, other community members, those involved directly in preschool provision, and funding agents.

Short (1984) writes that this belief that educare should be community-based rests upon the following principles;

The family should retain as much responsibility for child care and education as possible, or in other words, the family should receive as much help and support as it needs, not more or less.

The community should decide what services are needed by the families in that community, or families should be able to choose what services they wish to make use of.

The community should be responsible for setting up and managing the services, or at least be actively involved in service provision.

Professionalisation of services is not important and may even be considered undesirable. The skills of community members should be used as far as possible.

The community, usually meaning the families who use the services, should pay for the services.

We concur with this as a starting point for intervention. The fundamental requirement for a more productive social environment for learning must be a healthy relationship between community, home and educare centre for these form the environment in which the child learns.

A report on the viability and progress of preschools in the Eastern Cape records that

*'... community support is, however, probably the most significant variable in the operation of the schools, not primarily for the material benefits it brings ... but for the morale of the teachers and the educational benefit of the children'. (Whisson and Manona, 1990: 8)*

The independent, community backed preschool, they say, not only educates children in how to respond to formal education, it also educates their parents to participate fully in the process and to ask questions where appropriate.

*'Seen as an institution set in a community, the schools will flourish only if they have the support of the community as a whole - which, (in that context), in practice, means the farm owners or managers, the leading workers and the parents'. (Ibid: 17)*

Cohen (1991: 30) feels that *'...the only thing which seemed to unite people in a scattered, unmotivated community was their concern for the education of their small children'. For her 'preschools were always seen as facilities that must be of the community and integrated into community life' (Ibid:30).*

Barker (1986) feels that early childhood education programmes in developing societies will need to have a much wider and deeper function in relation to the overall development of those societies and need to be seen clearly within a local community framework if they are to succeed. Not only should they be managed by the local communities but para-professionals and parents from these communities should run the programmes. Barker (1985: 40) quotes a van Leer Foundation document which says that

*'The potential for change should be considered within the local setting, by and for the people whose lives it most closely affects. Education should take fully into account the place of the learner*

*within the specific family and community settings if it is to be of value; families and communities can thus be helped to better their own environment, within their own terms of reference, as an essential means for balanced social and individual development.*

## **PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

There can be no question about the influential effect that parents have on the educational and physical development of their children. Unfortunately, many disadvantaged parents who have themselves had limited exposure to education, tend to feel inadequate in this regard and withdraw from meaningful participation.

Several authors (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Levenstein, 1972; Karnes et al, 1973) have found that where parents are centrally involved in the educational process their children have made cognitive gains which have not been lost over time. These studies show that where young children receive help and encouragement from parents their educational achievements are higher than children from homes with equivalent socioeconomic status but less parental help. This is corroborated by Willmon, (1969) and Swan and Stavros, (1973) who have accumulated evidence of the effectiveness of parent involvement in young children's education in influencing academic motivation. Available evidence, therefore, points to the desirability of involving parents in their children's early education. Davie (1990: 10) states that

*'In disadvantaged communities, parental empowerment is crucial to the optimum development of the child. No matter how good the preschool service, without parental engagement, it will only partially*



*succeed. Parental education programmes, based on the enhancement of self-image, personal growth and communication skills, therefore have a pivotal role to play in the creation of an environment which is conducive to the healthy development of the child.'*

The Strathclyde Regional Council in a Report on Under Fives (1985: 45) write that

*'The active involvement of parents in planning and running pre-five services is essential for the long-term benefit of the children, as well as benefiting the parents themselves ... The greatest resource in any community for the provision of services to pre-fives and parents is the parents themselves.'*

The Preschool Playgroup Association (PPA) in the UK feel that

*'Parental responsibility is increasingly being recognised as a powerful means of achieving human growth and development for both adults and children' (PPA, 1986: 38)*

The conviction that parent involvement is an important ingredient for sustaining programme accomplishments after a young child's participation in an educare programme has led to a belief that to work with children alone is not sufficient.

## EMPOWERMENT

van der Eyken (1989) comments that of the many functions of a community, child care is one which carries the greatest potential for driving the empowerment process at the local level. The interconnectedness of child care with family life, social networks, school, parents' work, health care, and religion make it a strategic hub from which the empowerment process can radiate. According to van der Eyken, child care can contribute to the empowerment process of an entire community by facilitating mutually respectful interactions among parents and other caregivers and by fostering a critical reflection process leading to joint action to change the institutions controlling the allocation of resources. He identifies empowerment as being an ongoing process, centred in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation; and implying control over resources and individual lives. The outcomes of empowerment are that there may be some rather generic changes in individuals, groups, communities, networks and institutions, that result from long-term engagement in the empowerment process.

Paz and Paz (1988) feel that without the empowerment of the community -without the involvement of patterns of self-help, self-reliance and self-activation; without the fostering and support of local initiatives; indeed, without the community's assumption of responsibility and control for it's own affairs and functioning - without all these, the success of the most well-meaning early childhood educational programme will be partial, at best.

Govender (1987: 145) writes that

*'In order to overcome disadvantage and assure children of the optimal conditions for their development and growth, we must dedicate our efforts to the empowerment of the child, the parent and the community'.*

van der Eyken (1989) writes that the role of the professional in the empowerment process is to facilitate the empowerment of individuals, groups and communities. We are committed to shared expertise, cooperation, mutuality and reciprocity are essential to the empowerment process.

## **THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH WE WORK**

Wattle and daub structures nestle in the mountainous regions of Transkei, home to desperately disadvantaged and marginalised rural communities. Their abject poverty is exacerbated by their isolation, the lack of transport and communication services, the appalling conditions of roads, inadequate provision of health services and the absence of financial, material and professional services. Squatter areas are developing and inhabitants have a history of forced removal and resettlement. Unemployment figures are extremely high around 80%. The situation is made more critical by ever increasing cases of kwashiorkor, typhoid and malnutrition.

Families augment their meagre earnings with the produce of their eroded land and livestock, although few families have more than a few goats.

In the absence of water supplies, there is no substantial cultivation. Droughts of unusual intensity have devastated the tenuous subsistence economy. A century of deforestation caused by over-population of the land has led to the destruction of most of the timber resources in the region. The recession has brought home migrant labourers with little hope of renewed contracts. Government service is probably the largest source of employment in the region. For the rest, people rely on miserly remittances, pensions and grants.

This is the economic and social environment into which an Early Childhood Development Movement put down its roots to bring hope to those who need it. Against this background, parents, determined that their children should not reproduce their way of life, identified Early Childhood Education as a route out of their poverty trap. The educare centres that flourished and proliferated throughout the Transkei were founded on an understanding of, and respect for one's heritage, on communal harmony and understanding, and above all on a shared vision for their future of its children.

All vital elements in the region have been mobilised to develop a comprehensive network of support to the existing structures. Above all, the assumption of responsibility for control and its functioning has been based on a strategy of choice.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS**

Experience has taught us that if a development agency's projects and programmes are to have a lasting impact, they must be firmly rooted in the communities that it serves.

The principles of community development carried to their logical conclusion, are strategies for empowerment.

The role of a Service Organisation is to respectfully nurture and facilitate an enabling process. It is on the basis of these principles and in response to an overwhelming demand for assistance, that the Khululeka and Masikhule Community Education Development Centres have evolved. All programmes have a built-in flexibility based on a realistic assessment of local potential and resources with the capacity to respond to a communities identification of its needs and creative definition of its solutions.

By fostering local leadership potential, including all community stakeholders and harnessing parent support and involvement, community networks of support for Early Childhood Development have developed and have had a direct impact on our Organisations in terms of a multi-disciplinary approach and our commitment to holistic community development.

*'Community development', 'self-help' and 'empowerment'* need to be placed in proper perspective. The development and success of democratic community structures are subject to material considerations and the capacity of people to stand for what they believe in, in the face of internal and external resistance.

Educare communities clearly identify and negotiate their own terms of reference when engaging our Centres. This can best be understood against a background which illustrates the beginning of a partnership between a community and the Organisation.

Initial contact is usually made by a deputation of community representatives, who approach the Organisation and formally extend an invitation to staff to address a community meeting on the importance of Early Childhood Education and Care. Their motivation, in some instances, is merely to keep abreast with developments in neighbouring villages. In the absence of a communications infrastructure plans are negotiated with respect to time, date and directions to their isolated and often inaccessible villages.

Invariably, our Community Education Development Centre staff are welcomed into the community by as many as  $\pm 200$  villagers, some of whom are sceptical of the day's proceedings. Our demeanour has always been one of respect and acknowledgement; our approach informal and experiential; our mission to work in the interests of young children; our method to inform; our aim to impart knowledge. Parents are encouraged to experiment with a diverse range of educational toys and games, to share this experience and to identify that their children could learn from a similar experience. A broad range of programme options; alternative strategies for initiating an educare project; possible premises; the role of parents and community structures; the selection criteria for potential educare workers; resources and support services available, are all systematically outlined. Of pivotal importance is the value of early childhood education and care and how it relates to the basic right of all young children to survival, protection and development.

The process includes tentative questioning, doubt and misgivings, an expression of limitations, financial constraints and isolation, lively debate and serious considerations voiced by the community.

It is at this point that we withdraw. As groups discuss their problems collectively, new strategies emerge for dealing with some of the restrictions they encounter in their daily lives. The confidence born of this experience is best described as '*empowerment*'.

Within a very short period of time we are informed of the community's decision to set up an educare centre and a request for the training of, and assistance to, their educare teacher is put forward. This constitutes a mandate and gives legitimacy to the ensuing programme.

We as outsiders, cannot understand the internal dynamics of a community not our own, and the fact that the community selects its own candidate for training is the first tentative step in the ownership process. This is a critical choice, as the personality of the teacher, her/his commitment to the task and their ability to nurture and develop mutually beneficial relationships within their community, and around the educare project, is fundamental to its quality and indeed to its very existence.

## **PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT**

### **1. EDUCARE TRAINING**

All our educare training courses aim to provide students with a clear understanding and working knowledge of the developmental needs of young children. The quality and scope of the programmes are constantly being developed through the participation of student's, the utilisation of natural and local resources, the production of relevant and appropriate materials and curricula, and the incorporation of traditional and cultural

values. The practical components of all courses focus predominantly on skills development and the construction of relevant durable and quality educare equipment.

## **2. LOCALISED STUDY GROUPS**

In an attempt to decentralise training programmes and increase access, regional study groups are introduced to enable parents to contribute in a meaningful way to the enormous task of improving equipment and toys for their local educare centres. These workshops are initially an informal means of encouraging parent participation and also have the unique capacity of giving recognition to the aspirations of women in the community.

## **3. COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONAL TRAINING**

Within a short period of time, newly constituted Educare Committees usually express their frustrations and fear of being unable to direct, manage and finance their own educare projects. In response to their requests for administrative assistance, the Committee Skills and Basic Bookkeeping Courses are introduced. These provide communities with necessary skills to more effectively and efficiently manage their projects. The utilisation of available resources and the issue of community control are fundamental to these programmes.



#### **4. APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY**

The identification and/or construction of suitable premises for educare centres have grown out of the needs of communities and are integrated into the lifestyles and social fabric of the locality. Within rural communities, indigenous (and ingenious) building methods have been passed down from generation to generation, providing sound, tried and tested solutions. The result is a building style which evolves as a synthesis of appropriate technological solutions and the use of local building materials in response to the climatic, social and economic considerations of the communities.

Traditional structures have proved their durability. The use of local materials has reduced costs and opportunities to utilise local skills, abound. The potential of women as bricklayers and builders is evident. Fences have been erected to keep the children in, and the goats out.

#### **5. NUTRITIONAL, HEALTH AND SAFETY NEEDS**

The quality of the education of young children is inextricably linked to the health care of these children. Development agencies struggle to provide adequate support to educare teachers working in deprived communities, where no infrastructural health services are available. We have elicited the support of voluntary health workers, doctors, professional nurses and clinics, who have assumed the responsibility for training educare teachers in primary health care and first aid, introducing immunisation programmes and growth monitoring in educare centres, developing suitable curricula and for networking purposes.

Nutrition programmes have been introduced and vegetable gardens established. The produce has been used to supplement the feeding of the children, and is an informal fundraising activity. These gardens are cultivated and tended by parents in the community.

The provision of a safe and healthy environment for children is again dependent on a community's involvement in working towards that goal.

## 6. PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMME

We have through our shared experiences, learned that unless a programme accessible to parents is available to compliment and run parallel to the training of educare teachers and enthusiastic committee members, the success of such an early childhood programme will at best be partial. The Parent Educare Programme was introduced in the form of full day workshops which are co-ordinated at local level by educare teachers, fieldworkers, educare centre committee members and existing local networks and structures. Parents, teachers, employers, etc are exposed to a broad range of educare issues and are actively encouraged to involve themselves in the development of their individual projects. This programme has been a resounding success, and as people's awareness of the importance of good education and care of children in the early years is addressed, so their commitment evolves.

## 7. JUNIOR PRIMARY TEACHER SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

The introduction of a Junior Primary Teacher Support Programme has been our response to an ongoing demand from teachers in the formal education sector desperately seeking some form of support and encouragement. It has also been an opportunity to forge links between educare centres and primary schools, to facilitate the sharing of ideas and to promote a holistic approach to understanding and fulfilling the needs of young children in the formative years of their development. It has also been a means by which to further enrich the localised study group forums and to bridge the gap which exists between the formal and non-formal sector, the professional and para-professional, parents and educators.

## 8. BASIC ADULT EDUCATION

It is with a certain amount of trepidation that we now find ourselves once again, responding to the persistent demands of communities, embarking on an adult literacy programme. We have resisted these requests over the past few years, in an attempt to focus exclusively on the needs of young children. However, it has become clear that as long as we are committed to their children, we cannot resist our natural progression into that which we have already become - multi-disciplinary Early Childhood Development Organisations.

## CONCLUSION

The most exhilarating and potentially powerful development that has emerged over the past year, has been the establishment of Early Childhood Educare Associations, most of which are comprised of no less than approximately 50 individual educare projects.

It must be noted that there are ±4000 villages in the Transkei and our support therefore limited in terms of time, financial and development constraints. We have to withdraw from communities in order to enable Local Forums to take responsibility for the further development of Early Childhood Development in their villages. These Early Childhood Development Forums have been structured within villages and have mobilised into Sub-regional Structures and Associations with representation on the Provincial Executive of the South African Congress for Early Childhood Development.

As a united force they have the right to demand participation in policy formulation, to collectively educare and inform donor organisations, to set out codes of conduct for outside organisations wishing to help, to work towards increasing provision, to demand culturally appropriate localised materials, to set acceptable standards of educare and above all, to challenge the neglect and failure on the part of the State to deliver services.

These communities have a hard-won understanding of the importance of creative and critical thinking, of democratic participatory approaches and of shared responsibility.

They have a political task in mobilising people in the process of relocating social institutions that block the productive potential of that community and reduce access to resources.

Information empowers communities with the consciousness and skills necessary to secure a better future for our children and gives momentum to their capacity to mobilise.

Communities, small in scale, but solid structure, responding at grassroots to fundamental desires: living together, experiencing together, being together. It is within these communities that there is still a sense of stability, providing their children with a source of security, a sense of wellbeing, identify, wholeness and shared values, a place where children can be happy, at home and grow.

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