

SEARCHING FOR OTHER MECHANISMS FOR
HELPING FAMILIES AND PARENTS TO FIND
SOLUTIONS FOR THEIR PROBLEMS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The intention with this paper is not to label an ECD center-based approach neither as bad or wrong. It is primarily to encourage for other approaches beyond the center-based approach to be explored, be tested and implemented. The traditional ECD center-based approach (crèche/pre-school) is not the single best approach, it has not done enough to empower parents and families to dream up their own ideas of providing for the well-being of their children at home. There are other approaches that are being initiated and tested around the world, and local people should be encouraged to look at and explore them. Local people have to be encouraged to choose from these many approaches, what they think and see can work given their living environment.

2. BRIEF BACKGROUND ABOUT THE KOPANANG CONSORTIUM PILOT PROJECT

In the Free State province in South Africa, a 4 year pilot project named the Kopanang Consortium Project was established to *investigate*, to *initiate*, to *test* and *implement* alternative community based approaches: other than the traditional center-based approach of providing early child hood learning and development services for young children. It was estimated in 1995 that approximately 322 000 young children were found in the Free State province. Out of this total of 322 000 number, it was estimated that 93% were children living in informal settlements and rural areas. This then meant that the 93% were not benefiting from basic services that were meant for young children's learning and development. These children were not enjoying the benefit of accessing important services such as health, education, clean water, sewerage services, government food assistance, proper and reliable houses, properly constructed roads, etc. Many are children who were found during the day roaming the dangerous streets without parental supervision. These were children who were victims of rape, physical and sexual abuse incidents, many were eating out of rubbish bins, they were exposed to disease by playing in unhygienic playing areas. The majority of these children were silent victims of both family and street violence. The situation was unlikely to change for children especially with many of their parents loosing their jobs on a daily basis.

Factors such as unemployment led to little income for many families, added more problems to the home environment, and this resulted in parents feeling inhibited from providing fully for their children's growth and learning needs. These factors, with unemployment being the most serious, had forced parents' backs against the wall. Given then that parents were pre-occupied with problems and surviving, it is hardly surprising that they failed to make time and space for the promotion of stimulation and education of young children at home.

3. ABOUT THE APPROACHES KOPANANG TESTED AND IMPLEMENTED

The pilot project was commissioned to do anything and everything to promote community-based approaches that can *reach a large number of children*. Approaches that can be *sustained locally*. Approaches that will *recognize, validate, and support innovative* means devised by ordinary parents and other caregivers to provide for the learning, growth and development of young children at home.

In the four and half years learning process, two “models”, namely the Playgroup and Family support programmed, were implemented and tested and more than seventy communities in different parts of the Free State province were reached by the work of the Kopanang projects.

The objectives of both the Playgroup and Family Support programmed can be summarized as:

- to provide ordinary parents and care givers in unordinary circumstances with space and opportunity to organize themselves,
- to stimulate discussions amongst parents around the impact that family and community’s social, political and economic problems have on their children’s learning and development,
- to motivate working together of parents in an effort to tackle family and societal problems

For more than 3 years Kopanang stimulated lively debates among the ECD Training Agencies that participated in the Consortium around for e.g. whether a playgroup differs from the traditional ECD center-based approach. Issues such as . . . a playgroup is lead by a playgroup mother, which is no different from an ECD center being led by an ECD practitioner. Many of the playgroups struggled to be recognized and be registered under laws that govern the operation of traditional ECD centers; many of these playgroups have been anxiously applying for food and other types of subsidies from Welfare and Health departments. These playgroups were conditioned to meet the requirements of registration and to meet the same standards of operation as the ECD centers in order to qualify government support. These playgroups felt that officers in government departments who were responsible for processing requests for subsidies and nutrition assistance, were not open to looking at what playgroups were doing and how their approach could enhance government’s ability to service a large number of children that the playgroups and family support programmes were initiated to reach. Playgroups had to put in place what is found in the ECD center in order to obtain registrations and acceptance by authorities. Some were forced to change to become ‘formal ECD centers’ to gain acceptance and to receive assistance and whilst other remained as they were and had to live with the consequences of failing to gain access to assistance.

Same as the playgroups and center-based programmes argument, there has been a lively debate regarding how different is the Family Support programme implemented by Kopanang from the Home based programmes implemented by HIPPY South Africa.

4. FOR KOPANANG, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MAJOR LESSONS

Looking back and trying to reflect at the end of the pilot process, it is concluded that there has been a difference. Even though the circumstances under which children grow and develop have not change, there has been a different value added to children's lives by playgroups and family support programmes. The Kopanang project, through these two approaches, *prompted the importance of not ignoring the problems in the environment within which a child grows, learns and develop and to prioritize them as factors of paramount importance that need to be worked through if there is a wish to see children living and growing up happily.*

Realities such as families disintegrating, the increasing unemployment rate in many localities which result in feelings of hopelessness and boredom and despair; lack of information which result in people having little or no confidence in their ability to think and initiate alternative mechanisms for dealing with their problems; physical and sexual abuse of women and young children; absence of accessible health facilities and clean water; young people engaging in unacceptable behaviors such as prostitution and alcohol abuse; unavailability of infrastructure to house and resource and support local initiatives aimed at community development; daily increase in number of people who are HIV/AIDS affected; frightening statistics in numbers of illiterate parents; and many more are some of the factors that had been overlooked before and were not attended to.

It is the very same issues indicated above that Kopanang started to bring up as priorities on the agendas of discussions with parents. Parents were encouraged to start thinking about what impact these and other issues have directly or indirectly on their ability to provide for children's needs. Parents through these programmes, gained courage to try addressing them. The themes developed by project participants in their description of what they saw as the work of their projects, serves as testimony.

In some places, people have described the programmes as mechanisms to revive people's belief in their own ability to improve their living situation. In other areas they were described as platforms for mobilizing for the full exploitation of all local resources and structures to benefit the entire community and not just a small portion. In other areas they were describes as providing a safe room to allow parents to take a journey to the past and find out how they grew up, what were the traditional and cultural practices in their childhood lives and how these fit in with the way they bring-up their children presently.

In all gathering and discussions, for the first time parents were asked:

- What parenting means for them?
- How were they brought up?
- What do they have and can use to benefit their children?
- How did their parents provide for their early learning and development?
- What has changed?
- How do they feel and cope with such changes?
- What are they doing to ensure that changes are not leaving them behind with everything they know and have?

And these were important questions to ask in order for Kopanang to bring out answers that it can bring-up as possible suggestions to the "mainstream" of thinking around child care and development.

This approach of questioning by Kopanang, provided ordinary people in unordinary situations space and opportunity to get organized, to start discussing the impact of these problems on their lives and their children's lives; to start sharing around how together they can tackle these problems; to learn what and how others in different places are going about tackling similar problems; and together plan around initiatives they can implement to solve the problems. Kopanang's work valued parents as individuals and as a team and promoted their working together in order to realize greater change in the lives of young children at home and in the society. More over, the stories that people have been telling and what they see as changes in their lives, testifies that Kopanang's work respect the cultural and traditional knowledge found in parents and moved from there. This resulted in the following conclusions drawn around adult learning;

- When people know that they are respected and valued, they respect and value themselves and commit more to the cause.
- Parents proved that they are very capable of managing easily what they start and implement and what they are assisted to carry forward rather than what they are taught without considering what they know.
- Parents are important in the lives of children because they feel for and love their children and are best role players in tenaciously fighting for what is right for their children. Provided with opportunity and support, they can use their power to change how children are treated or serviced.
- Parents are more than capable to think-out ideas on their own, and can initiate mechanisms for improving their situation. And it is when they are confident in what they have and know, that they feel placed in a better position to bargaining with whoever has the resources, and can start dictating what they need and how resources are to be used.

5. WHAT HAPPENS AT THE END OF THE PILOT PROJECT

Though Kopanang is coming to an end in September 1999, the work it has started will not end. In Free State an initiative through which we can keep alive and continue further the work that Kopanang started, is in making. An initiative that draws from this and other experiences and that believes in the empowerment of those who are faced with problems to develop their own mechanisms of solving their problems. The success of this initiative will provide answers to the burning questions around sustainability as it will be focusing its energies building on what parents and families have started.

If people start by implementing what they feel comfortable with and can manage easily for themselves, they themselves will work on how to sustain those. Examples to this are local burial societies, women's income generation societies, and other initiatives that were started by local people and are still operating, members of these societies do make plans and means of ensuring their sustenance. There is a need for newly established or freshly modified community-based childcare and learning practices, there is a need for programmes and organizations that do not separate early childhood learning and development from the development of the entire community. If in deed there is a need for us to find answers and solutions for this troubled world, more needs to be done. There is a need to develop different understanding around ECD, community development as well as some of the jargons presently involved in it. On many occasions for example, many practitioners do not understand in totality what many of the words used in ECD or community development mean, yet they continue using them and encourage their usage. Words like family and parenting in an African context can have a different meaning to family and parenting in a European context.

Many words such as these that are found in English are unbearably difficult to translate in many African languages; still we fight for an effort to have them translated into African language. If a word is not there in your language, is it not possible that it is not applicable to your tradition or culture? Should the latter be the case, then our society is in great danger as our work in influencing parents, encourages them to pass over to our young children a confused culture and identity.

Huge sums of money have been spent and resources have been invested, but what has come out is not enough. This is observed by President Thabo Mbeki in his address to the nation on the national women's day (1999/08/09) when he notes that, the lives of many of the women in the country were and still are characterized by low levels of illiteracy and inequitable access to education, health, housing, water, fuel sources and employment opportunities. These very same women referred to, are women with young children. It is not only in South Africa, in many of the countries in Africa we observe on TVs and hear on radios the unrest they experience, shortage of food, dungeons named houses they live in, emotional and physical pains and suffering they experience daily. With all the experiences and expertise gathered and gained over the years, people all over Africa are crying for something to happen to change the present state of life. There is a need to find a way of ensuring that experience gathered is used to benefit the larger number of children. To figure out who holds and owns the experience, and how it can be shared to build a pool of skills and knowledge in parents and families.

There seems to be a common understanding and a mutual agreement amongst many of the African States leaders, that what is termed today as poverty in Africa, results mainly from colonization and other different oppressive inhuman governments systems. Why is it that our work around the early childhood development not acknowledging the effects such a past and such systems have had on lives of the people? Why is it that we find still no implementation of methodologies that are geared to root out the dependency syndrome and mentality, and implant belief and faith in people's own capacity to continue surviving?

The premise formulated by the Family Resource Coalition in Chicago that '*... the influence of the family on a child cannot be overestimated, the family teaches a child ways to live in a complex world and it provides a child with a sense of belonging and a foundation for self-esteem...*' (refer to their website) provides wisdom on how to go about on concentrating resources and energies. To concentrate on the situation in which even after pre-school years, a child has to concentrate on the situation in which even after pre-school years, a child has to continue learning ways of surviving under family influence and teachings.

The new millennium calls on to everyone to join the search for finding what ways and mechanisms are applied by parents and families apply to solve the problems they face as these problems do affect children directly or indirectly. The search to implement community based approaches that challenge the psychological, cultural and physical barriers that limits people from acting to solve these problems. Ngugi Wa Thiongo in his book Devil in the Cross (1982:34) encourages whoever takes this journey of searching to be confident and optimistic when he notes that "...he who searches carefully, never fails to find...". This is a risky journey, we started it in Kopanang, and we are going to continue further traveling it. For anyone to emerge victorious in this new course and to champion it, there will be a need to look at applying a different yardstick in measuring the impact any work has on the lives of the people. One of the ways to go about is by **observing closely what action follows, taken by those people as a result of our intervention and efforts**. To establish how easy is it for parents, families and society to continue teaching a child ways to live in a complex world; how easy do they find it for themselves to continue providing a child the sense of belonging and a foundation for self-esteem.

This course conditions any actor, amongst other things, to:-

- i) redefine together with parents, given the pertinence of each community situation where children live, what early childhood learning early childhood growth and development mean.
- ii) establish from the beginning what else do parents, families and society need; without undermining what they have been doing all along; to bring up children who from an early age gains confidence in their own intelligence and capacity to survive.

The above conditions challenges the community support workers to be open to learning and to carry, amongst others; these values:

- ***Affirm people's existence*** meaning finding a “concrete way of saying to people that they matter because they are people”. The point being made is that people who have known nothing but scorn and humiliation need symbols of hope to lift them out of despair and to empower them to liberate themselves.
- ***Self-reliance*** meaning that the conceptualization, direction, implementation and evaluation of any initiative should be by those it was established for
- ***Self-confidence*** meaning that people are aware of their own knowledge and skills, also they are encouraged to exhaust their strengths and work on their weaknesses. People at the end of an intervention are confident in themselves, their ability to think, their capacity to initiate and implement. (Barney Pityane & others in the book “BOUNDS OF POSSIBILITY”)

Bearing these and other values in mind, the goals of the community support worker's will need to be extended and include:

- Creating a platform for local people to come together;
- Creating awareness on the importance of early childhood learning and development and how the environmental realities affect it;
- Encouraging local people to take joint steps and actions to confront these environmental constraints;
- Exposing people living in unordinary circumstances to what and how other people in other areas are going about in an effort to improve their situations;
- Motivating local people to use what they have and know, and assuring them that they have what it takes;

CONCLUSION

Searching for something else, over and above what is known, what has been tested and what the world is confident in applying, sounds like a risky journey, **but then more needs to be done**. In the book 'Africa the Time Has Come (1998)', Thabo Mbeki dreams of an African continent that is no longer the object of humanitarian assistance nor the charitable attention of the rest of the world. He dreams of the creation of enough jobs; the provision of formal and relevant education/training; the construction of enough clinics; the provision of houses for the homeless; the establishment of a clean and healthy environment and he confidently concludes that **this dream is a workable dream**.

Everything done to realize this dream so far is not enough, more needs to be done. In order to afford young children in the African continent to know from an early age who they are, where they come from, where they want to be and be confident in navigating how they arrive there, more needs to be done. And it is when there is commitment and dedication to the search for finding other mechanisms of assisting parents and families to solve their problems, that more can be achieved.

The partners who participated in the Kopanang Consortium Pilot Project in the Free State are committed to continue the search. Looking at where the African continent and its people come from, seeing where they are and what has been achieved so far, partners in the Consortium are convinced that this dream and other dreams are workable.

Encouraged again by Thabo Mbeki (08/05/1996) when he said '...whatever the setbacks of the moment, nothing can stop us now! Whatever the difficulties, Africa shall be at peace! However improbable it may sound to the skeptics, Africa will prosper! Whoever we may be, whatever our immediate interest, however much we carry baggage from our past, however much we have been caught by the fashion of cynicism and loss of faith in the capacity of the people, nothing can stop us now...'. These partners are more than convinced that there are solutions and they are confident that they will find them.

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