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IMPROVING EARLY LEARNING FOR CHILDREN IN VRYGROND CAPE TOWN

COMMUNITY REPORT - FINDINGS FROM THE PROJECT ON SAFE,
INCLUSIVE, PARTICIPATIVE PEDAGOGY (SIPP)
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE)

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True North
Siyakhula
Where Rainbows Meet
Living Hope
Butterfly Art Project
Vrygrond ECD Forum
Little Angels Educare
Rainbow Educare
Vrygrond Community Development Trust
Early Learning Resource Unit (at the start of the project)

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The project on Safe, Inclusive, Participative Pedagogy (SIPP) in Early Childhood Education (ECE)

The project on Safe, Inclusive, Participative Pedagogy (SIPP) is a four-year long international research project. It aims to identify and contribute to ideas on learning and teaching strategies that are safe, inclusive, and participative. These learning and teaching strategies or pedagogy need to be able to be implemented for a lengthy period of time, in environments that lack resources such as Vrygrond Cape Town.

The five international project partners are:

- Children's Institute, University of Cape Town, South Africa;
- International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood, Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil;
- Bethlehem University, The West Bank, Palestine;
- University of Eswatini, Eswatini; and
- Childhood and Youth Studies Research Group, Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

Each research partner analysed national, regional and local policies for Early Childhood Education (ECE) and the implementation of those policies. Each research partner except the University of Edinburgh, did research in a case study format in a community where multiple risks for child development exist, working with key ECE stakeholders in that community. This was designed to:

- explore, develop, and critically consider how safe, inclusive and participatory early learning practices are understood and applied, within that community;
- support the engagement of community and national stakeholders (government and civil society organisations), to mobilise action to improve early learning and to promote community development and well-being; and
- share and develop the learning within the project and from the project, to support ECE in other environments that lack resources .

WHY IS EARLY LEARNING IMPORTANT?

The learning that takes place in the early years of a child's life has a lasting impact on their future success and well-being – and benefits society as a whole.

- In the first few years, a child's brain is developing more quickly than at any other time; the foundations for all future learning and development are shaped by their early experiences and interactions with others.
- Stimulating experiences and interactions help young children to develop thinking and problem-solving skills, language and communication. Not only are these the bases for literacy and the social and emotional skills necessary for positive relationships with others, they are also important for school readiness, academic success and lifelong learning.
- Research shows that children who have high quality education early on in their lives are more likely to graduate from high school, pursue higher education, and have better employment prospects. They are also less likely to engage in criminal behaviour or experience chronic health problems.
- For parents to be actively involved in their children's early learning is as important as the children attending an early learning programme. It strengthens the bond between parents and children and helps to ensure that learning builds on local child rearing practices and the things that parents consider to be important.

For all these reasons, supporting the early development of children is a high priority, in South Africa and throughout the world.

The SIPP project aims to help develop our understanding of the opportunities and challenges in providing early learning across different circumstances and especially in low resource communities.



INTRODUCTION

The Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town has been working with community partners in the Vrygrond area, using a participatory research approach to explore that community's perspectives on safe, inclusive, participative pedagogies. "A participatory research approach" means that community members were involved in developing research questions and methods appropriate for their community, reflecting on and validating the findings and then in deciding on actions for follow up.

This feedback report presents the summary of the findings, to share what has been learned with the early learning community with whom we have been working. In order to make these findings as useable as possible, we have also used them to co-create an Action Plan for Vrygrond with the local early learning community.

Aim

The SIPP project's team of researchers have worked with the organisation True North and the members of the local early childhood education (ECE) community in Vrygrond since 2020. We are part of a four-year long research project ending in June 2024.

The project aimed to find out more about the learning and teaching strategies in early childhood, on the ground in Vrygrond. Specifically, our aim was to understand, and think together about, how various people understand, and engage with, inclusive early childhood learning and participation, and how to create a safe environment for early learning. These people were staff in early learning programmes, parents, children, and local community members.

Our shared learning will be a resource that people involved in Early Childhood Education (ECE) can use to mobilise action, such as lobbying for additional services, prioritising training and support needs. It will also facilitate the sharing of knowledge about what is needed to enhance inclusion, participation, and safety in early learning.

True North is a non-profit organisation that is leading initiatives to improve early childhood development (ECD) within the marginalised community of Vrygrond and Overcome Heights.

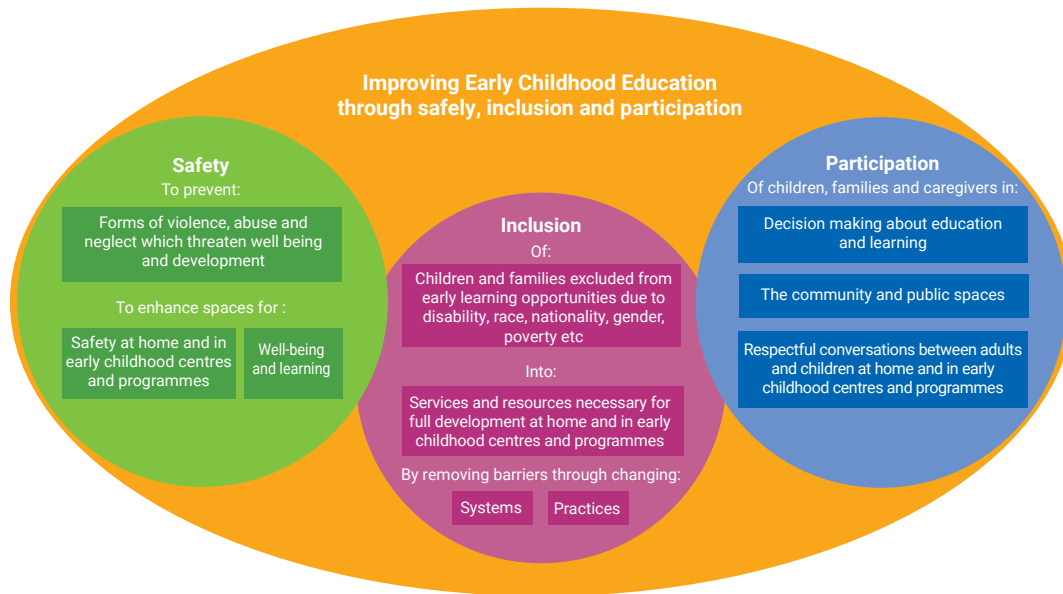
The research findings were used as a basis for a focused plan of action for Vrygrond that can be built on over time and sustained by those involved in ECD in that area. The action plan

- described relevant challenges;
- mapped key actions related to these challenges; and
- identified key resources that are already available in the community, as well as those available more widely, that could support these actions. Those resources may include existing programmes run by government, service organisations or community leaders and influential groups such as faith-based organisations.

We hope that this plan will be able to be used for leveraging resources from other sources such as donors and local government.

Key concepts

International and South African ECD policies and laws have a strong focus on what makes it possible for young children to learn –safety, inclusion and participation. However, for early learning opportunities to be effective, it is important to appreciate how these concepts are understood and put into practice at the local level. This will identify the various priorities, barriers and supports for early learning in each environment.



Safe environments

This aims to

- prevent all forms of violence and other violations of rights that threaten the development of children; and to
- enhance spaces for safety at home, in the community and in early learning programmes; so that well-being and learning are safeguarded.

Inclusion

No child or family should be excluded from early learning opportunities on the basis of

- race, nationality, religion, gender, language, ability;
- financial need, difficult household circumstances including domestic violence, substance abuse or lack of parent knowledge of how to support early learning.

Barriers should be removed through changing systems and practices that prevent exclusion.

Participation

- There should be respectful conversations with children at home and in ECE programmes.
- Children should actively participate and make choices in the classroom
- Children and families should be free to participate in the community and public spaces.



THE SOUTH AFRICAN CASE STUDY

The case study site

Vrygrond – including the informal Overcome Heights section – in Ward 45 is similar in many ways to other poorly resourced communities in South Africa. About 20 kilometres from central Cape Town, Vrygrond is one of South Africa’s first informal settlements and carries the legacy of many decades of inequality. Some 42,000 people live in this densely populated area, which is home to a diverse population of Coloured and isiXhosa-speaking South Africans, and foreign nationals who are mostly from Malawi and Zimbabwe. In 2014 there were approximately 5,000 children under five years old living in Vrygrond.

Vrygrond is a vibrant area with a taxi rank, informal traders and small businesses of various kinds – but it is also characterised by high unemployment and poverty, as well as related social problems such as crime and violence, domestic violence and substance abuse. There is no police station – and clinic services are offered every second week, or in the neighbouring Seawinds community. Civil society is active, with many NGOs supporting infrastructure developments and providing a community library and various education initiatives. The Vrygrond Community Development Trust plays a role in the coordination of some of these activities.

There are two **public primary schools** – one built with donor funds.

Early childhood development (ECD) programmes are housed in 37 ECD centres. Eight of these are registered and receive the Western Cape Education Department subsidy, as well as support from the Learning Initiative’s ‘Blocks for Growth Programme’ which supports children who are falling far behind in their development. ECD centres are members of an active ECD Forum and receive support from True North, an ECD NGO which provides support and development opportunities for ECD programmes in the area. In addition, the Butterfly Art Project and other NGOs offer part-time programmes for a small number of parents and young children.

The 37 ECD centres in Vrygrond are attended by approximately 1,700 children – which means that ***around two thirds of young children in the area do not have access to organised ECD programmes.***

Approach and information gathering

When the SIPP project started, the Children’s Institute approached True North to partner in the case study. True North is the leading ECD resource and training organisation in Vrygrond, and follows a participatory community development approach. True North then contacted the local ECD Forum Executive to establish their interest and support; after which they assisted with establishing a Community Advisory Committee to guide the SIPP project. This committee included members of the ECD Forum, the Vrygrond Community Development Trust ECD representative, True North, and local NGOs who provide services to young children, namely Where Rainbows Meet, Siyakhula, Butterfly Art Project and Living Hope.

Shortly after the first engagement with True North, the COVID-19 pandemic struck and South Africa went into lockdown in March 2020. As a result, we only restarted working together in July 2021.

Role of the Community Advisory Committee

Meetings of the Community Advisory Committee, held over several months, explored what the local community understood safety, inclusion and participation to mean – these being the three underpinning concepts of the SIPP project. This informed the way questions were asked and provided an opportunity to test our methods for interviews and focus group discussions) for our research. It also helped us to identify, and connect with, relevant stakeholders for the research.

As young children were a stakeholder group, members of the Advisory Committee helped fine-tune the activities and questions for our conversations with them.

After the data had been gathered, the Advisory Committee reviewed and commented on emerging findings and are in the process of developing a Community Action Plan based on these.

Information gathering from participants

Table 1 shows how data were collected.

Table 1: How data was collected – sorted according to stakeholders

Stakeholder (number)	Activity
Community Advisory Committee	4 meetings 4 focus groups on key concepts
Provincial representatives	Interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Social Development • Western Cape Education Department

Stakeholder (number)	Activity
Local stakeholders	In-depth interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward councillor • 2 faith-based social service organisations • 2 ECD principals Mapping safe and unsafe places for children in Vrygrond
ECD principals and practitioners	3 focus groups, including child safety mapping
Parents and other caregivers	3 focus groups, and one child safety mapping
Children 4 – 6 years old	5 meetings per group for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 small groups attending ECD centres • 2 groups attending a non-centre-based programme

A variety of methods was used to gather information:

- interviews on specific open ended questions
- focus groups with questions to focus the discussions and
- some mapping and visualisations depending on the concept being explored.

For the conversations with children, persona dolls⁴ ‘told’ introductory stories as the main way to promote conversations. Children also drew and discussed pictures about what had been important to them in these sessions.

4 Persona dolls are large dolls representing a range of diversity that practitioners use to build relationships with children through storytelling and problem-solving.



MAIN FINDINGS

SAFETY

Many people may not immediately think about safety when talking about early learning, but the safety of children in an early learning programme – at home and in the broader community – are key concerns and goals in the South African children’s policy.

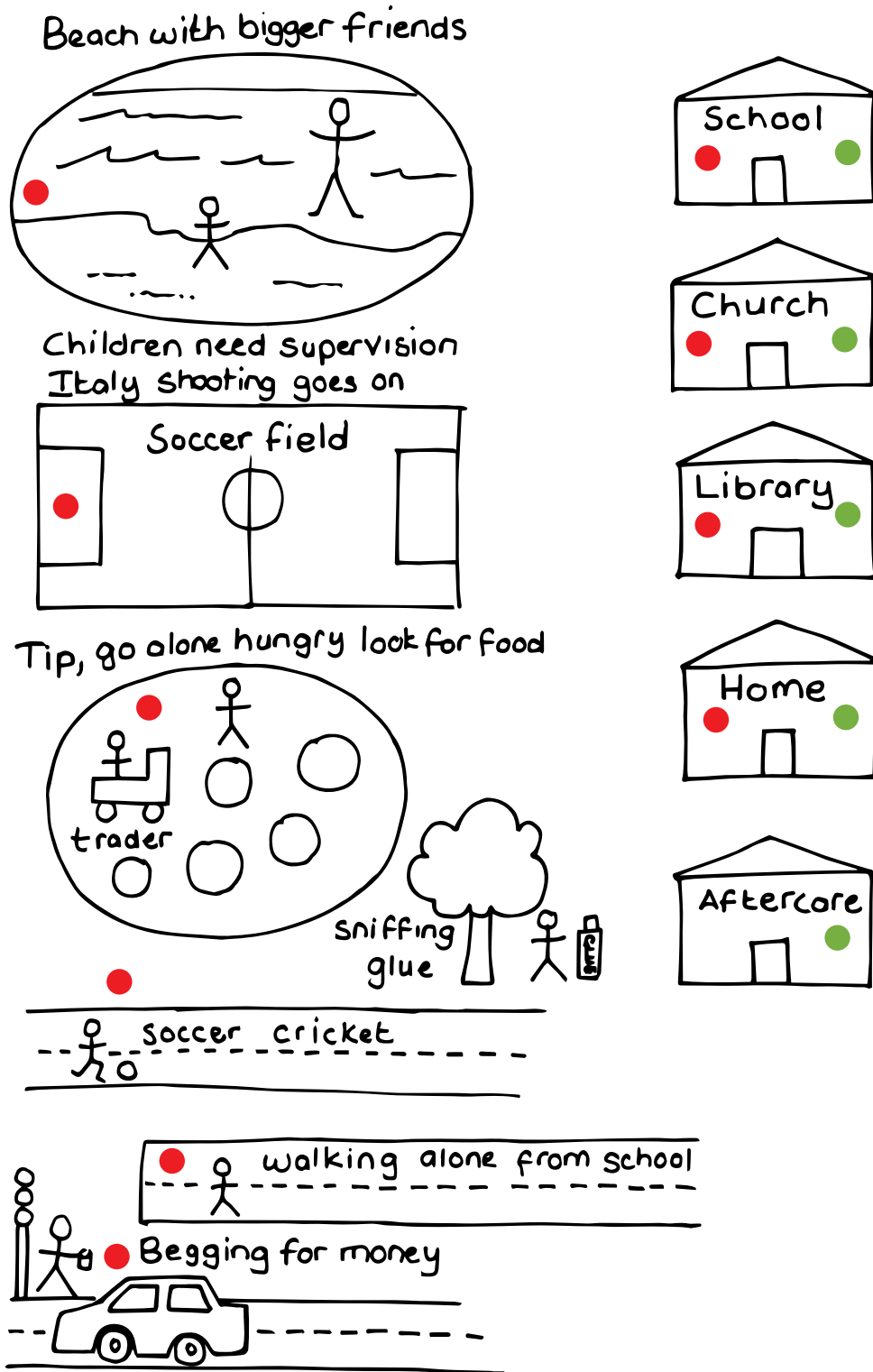
This research project aimed to:

- understand how safety in the context of early learning was understood by various community stakeholders;
- identify the current threats and barriers to child safety; and
- identify protective practices and resources that are in place and which could be built on and strengthened.

Our starting point was to hear what people understood by the term ‘safety’ for young children, after which we looked at safety in the home, in early learning programmes and in the community. We discussed when and where young children feel safe or unsafe. The Community Advisory Committee, practitioners and parents drew maps of the safe and unsafe spaces for young children in Vrygrond. These were discussed, as well as what can be done to make homes, early learning programmes and the broader community safer for young children - and what still needed to be done to achieve this.

Parents drew a map of safe (green) and unsafe (red) places, noting that there is safety, but also potential danger, in schools/ECD centres, the library, churches and homes (shown by the green and red dots). Most outdoor spaces are dangerous for children including gang shootings at the Italy Sports Field, and the beach. Unsafe practices such as going to the tip (landfill), walking alone, begging in the road and playing in the road were highlighted.

Figure 1: A map created by parents of safe (green) and unsafe places (red) for young children in Vrygrond/Overcome Heights



Box 1: Reflections of research participants on safety and early learning

“Our children are only safe when they are at school. After school they do not know what to do and they end up in the streets because there are no safe spaces for them in the community.”
(Parents of children enrolled in a once a week ECD programme)

“Your safe space is not ... just the facility. It is also your staff being informed, knowing how to be empathetic, how to deal with discipline, how to deal with issues of concern within the social context of your community.” (ECD Principal)

“Physical safety is more about putting your fence up and/ or putting your burglar bars up - that kind of things. But are we really safe? No. So we address some safety issues in our daily programme. We even have, like, a topic that is about safety. So then for a whole week they will just learn about safety: what is safe and what is not safe. So like a lot of things like road safety, fire safety as well as safety in the house.” (Focus group discussion with ECD principals)

“We see how parents address children in the food lines – swearing, yelling, sending little ones alone. Already at this age they are having to look after themselves.”
(Member of Service Organisation)

“Traumatised adults are trying to be a safe space for children, but they react to the children very often the way they’ve been raised. And ... it’s a painful thing to see.”
(Community representative)

“Yes, the education is important but getting the children out of the house, getting the children into a safe environment; making sure that children should have at least one healthy meal. So, unfortunately it has become more about keeping the child mentally and physically, a functioning human being (than about education).” (Community representative)

“You must be safe whole time. You can’t just go alone to the shop - you must go with someone.”
(Child, aged 5 years).

What was reported about the safety of young children in Vrygrond

Community service organisation respondents, parents and practitioners said that there was a general lack of physical and emotional safety for children, including in a few ECD centres where discipline was harsh or there was not enough attention to physical safety. (This included too few staff to supervise children at all times, such as when they go to the toilet; and not being prepared enough on what actions to take if a fire broke out.) While reflecting on some safety concerns specifically related to ECD centres, people mostly spoke about broader community safety issues that impact early learning.

Some homes are not safe; alcohol and drug abuse, financial hardship, domestic violence and child neglect and abuse are all problems. Many adults are traumatised; although they try to provide a safe space for children, they very often react to children in the way they themselves

were raised. So children are spoken to harshly at home and smacking them is the norm; they are told to 'just be quiet'. Living conditions are overcrowded, with several families living in one yard. This can put children at risk, through exposing them to a number of these forms of lack of safety.

Children - the streets by themselves, at risk of car accidents and violence; gangs control the parks so children cannot play there, and there is no police station. The well-structured Neighbourhood Watch and Police Forum find it hard to attract volunteers, as people are economically desperate and seek incentives. Over the weekends when NGOs, ECD centres and schools are closed, there are no recreational facilities or safe spaces.

Parents also raised environmental problems that make children unsafe, such as garbage dumped all over the community and leaking drains – as well as exposure to violence due to the number of taverns and fights.

Some examples of harsh practices in early learning programmes were given - when practitioners shout at the children and speak badly about their parents in front of the children. That being said, community organisation respondents, practitioners and parents perceived early learning programmes as safe spaces for children. Parents felt strongly that the only other safe space, other than the ECD centre, is when children are with them.

ECD staff and community organisations stressed the importance of emotional safety, of recognising signs of trauma and of paying attention to keeping children mentally and socially well. There has been training on trauma, raising awareness of what children are going through. Some ECD centres are creating safe spaces in the class where children are able to express themselves, to feel free to be children.

Children's perspectives

The children we interacted with saw their homes, ECD centres and community organisations as safe places. Parents and 'Father God' were seen as protective. When asked if they ever felt unsafe at their ECD centres, they chorused "no" and gave many examples of liking their teachers, the food and activities. They explained that they did not feel safe when home alone.

Children shared common childhood fears of dogs, the dark, ghosts and the bogeyman - but they were also highly aware of potential dangers in Vrygrond. There are limited safe places to play - indoors and at ECD centres etc but not outside. They are afraid of being stolen, hurt or killed by strangers if they are not accompanied by a parent; of being shot if they go out at night or of being injured in road accidents or fires. Police are sometimes seen by children as threatening but also as protective if they are lost. Many of these perceptions seemed to reflect what adults had told them.

Children also spoke about strategies for keeping safe, however, which included being accompanied by an adult when outside of home, calling on their parents and teachers, and getting help when lost and contacting Emergency Services.

How do these understandings about safety link with ECD policy?

The South African National Integrated ECD (NIECD) policy has a very strong focus on physical infrastructure safety standards, that staff are not recorded on the National Child Protection Register as being unsuitable to work with children, as well as on positive discipline in the ECE programme. While all of this was seen as important, community organisation respondents spoke of broader priorities such as:

- addressing the inadequate quality of many early learning programmes, due to a lack of resources such as space, materials, money for food, and trained staff;
- interactions that support children’s mental and emotional safety, including identifying, and following up on, problems and developmental delays; and
- how safety risks in the home and community impact on child well-being.

They recognised the need for co-ordination between all community services impacting the lives of children and families in Vrygrond to create a safe environment.

Key messages about safety

1. As well as being physically safe, children need to feel accepted and loved and to be able to explore and express themselves – all aspects of **emotional safety** that enables early learning.
2. There is a general **lack of community safety** due to the wider social and economic problems including poverty, adult trauma, and crime and violence. This impacts profoundly on families’ ability to support early learning and on children’s opportunities to play and participate freely outside of the home and early childhood programmes.
3. **Environmental concerns** - such as unsafe roads, health issues such as leaking drains, garbage, and a lack of safe outdoor play spaces - need to be addressed.
4. There needs to be more **support for parents** to help them provide emotionally safe and responsive care at home and to meet their children’s basic needs.
5. **Early learning programmes** are important emotional and physical safe spaces for many children, where they can learn, express themselves and be free to be children. However, due to a shortage of free and affordable programmes, many children do not have access to them, putting them at risk.

INCLUSION

As with safety, our starting point was understanding what various community stakeholders understood by ‘inclusion’. We also wanted to hear about children’s and parents’ experiences of inclusion in early learning opportunities at home, in ECD centres and in the community. We discussed which children are treated differently/excluded in Vrygrond, who might find it difficult to get a place in an early learning programme, or not be able to benefit fully from being there – and why.

ECD stakeholders identified practices and resources to support inclusion in early learning and possibilities for strengthening these.

Box 2: Reflections of research participants on the idea of Inclusion

Inclusion is:

“Whatever any other child in our city has for themselves, is what our children need. But we need extra support because we have fallen behind.” (Faith-based respondent)

“Accessing pre-school and school.” (Parents -children who are not enrolled at an ECD centre)

“Respect and acceptance: Being loved/accepted for who you are, not labelled, not judged.” (Community Advisory Committee member)

“Pathways between what happens at home and at schools are very important.” (Community Advisory Committee member)

“You should help others – pick up those who have fallen down, share food with someone who doesn’t have, take them to school, share toys; sharing is caring.” (Child aged 5 years)

Participants understood ‘inclusion’ to comprise access to early learning services rather than leaving children ‘on the road’. It includes making this possible through support (e.g. where fees are a barrier and where children without birth certificates cannot receive the subsidy) or through less strict compliance standards.

Inclusion requires active non-discrimination in relation to all factors like race, language, religion, gender, disability and socio-economic circumstances – this is a contextual approach. For instance, many parents keep disabled children at home; and children who ‘don’t come clean to school’ (who don’t have decent clothes and have broken shoes) might be picked on by other children.

That being said, there was a little evidence of there being rules about what and how girls and boys must play. There was also evidence in some learning centres that diversity was not recognised well enough when there were children who were different in some way.

Some exclusion of children who are foreign nationals was reported. The language of learning and teaching, mostly English, could be an issue if children do not understand it. Also, when parents do not speak English, they cannot participate fully in discussions with staff.

Inclusion also requires that barriers to learning are recognised and tackled, and that the needs of each child are seen. Children who have learning difficulties are often labelled 'naughty' or 'unteachable' or are not recognised. Early learning practitioners need practical training and support to work with the wide range of needs that children have. There has been some inclusion training but community organisation staff told us that practitioners find it hard to apply this without having practical classroom support.

Children's perspectives

Children generally felt included at their pre-schools and described the 'hurt', 'sad' and 'not nice' feelings when not included. They gave examples of children who are excluded – like those who 'pee in their pants', 'fall down' and a child in a pre-school who was physically aggressive to others.

Figure 2: A five-year-old girl drew herself playing soccer with a boy who had been excluded from a soccer game with others. She explained that girls can also play soccer and he is teaching her.



Children also talked about strategies when they were excluded, such as ‘get your mommy or other children to play with you’, ‘tell teacher’, ‘play alone’, ‘fight the children’ (who won’t play), say ‘I will never ever play with you again’! Several children said that they should help others – pick up those who have fallen, share food with someone who doesn’t have any, take them to school, share toys.

How do these understandings of inclusion link with ECD Policy?

The South African NIECD policy says that every infant and young child should have access to essential, quality ECD services. The policy speaks about inclusion in a broad way, as being ‘when all children are actively welcomed and supported so that they can optimally participate and benefit from early learning and development opportunities... to enable them to participate on an equal level with others’.

White paper 6 on inclusive education notes that barriers to inclusion include:

- socio-economic factors and other environmental factors (such unhealthy living conditions, neglect, violence) that place children at risk;
- disability;
- not including parents;
- race;
- language; and
- gender discrimination.

The understandings that community organisation respondents have of inclusion, are in line with the policy. They did however highlight gaps in implementation of the policy that affect vulnerable people, and also that there is too little support for ensuring non-discrimination.

Key messages about inclusion

1. Access to early learning services is an important part of inclusion. **Barriers** include fees, not having birth certificates, as well as disability.
2. Simply having access to early learning services does not equal inclusion. There needs to be **acknowledgment and respect for diversity of all kinds** – nationality, race, language, gender, ability and socio-economic circumstances.
3. Barriers and difficulties need to be addressed, with a **focus on the needs of individual children**.
4. Many early learning programmes take an **active approach to supporting diversity** and promoting anti-bias.

PARTICIPATION

As with the other concepts, stakeholders shared their understandings of what is involved in young children's participation in their early learning and development – at home, in early learning programmes and in the community. They were asked how children and parents participate in decisions at the ECD centres and how they felt about this; they were also asked about how much of 'say' (space to voice opinions) and choice children should be allowed in their lives at home. Barriers and good practices were identified.

This was the most challenging of the three concepts to unpack – which may partly reflect current norms in society in which children have very little 'say'. Those adults involved in the study understood participation as being involved, included and being able to express oneself.

Box 3: Reflections of research participants on the idea of participation

“For participation to happen, some shifts with adults need to take place - a change of attitude towards the child.” (Community Advisory Committee member)

“It seems like (children) don't feel they have a voice, because they are not treated like they have a voice.” (Faith-based respondent)

“Parents haven't had participatory approaches modelled to them and feel daunted. This is often based on culture, which is viewed to be discouraging participation. [There is a] tension in participation between guidance and choice.” (Community representative)

“The teacher sometimes allows us to choose” but more often “we cannot tell teacher, teacher tell us”. (Child, aged 5 years)

ECD staff explained how participation was enhanced by the child feeling safe, being encouraged to engage, and creating a programme where children play freely, have fun and are allowed to do things for themselves, within age-appropriate boundaries. Examples of ECD programme activities that support participation are: children telling their own stories, children bringing items from home for theme tables and fantasy areas, and book-sharing (talking about the book together rather than just being read to). An teaching approach which considers the needs and interests of different children to allow for participation is difficult to implement where there are large groups of children and where teachers may be too busy to pick up on what children say.

Parent participation in the early learning programmes was also highlighted, whereby they are invited to come and build their trust with the ECD centre. It was noted that many parents do not understand the value of ECD or participatory approaches, however, and that what is regarded as the norm in a culture can discourage this. In addition, parents may be too tired to attend meetings - and language barriers made it difficult for foreign parents to participate.

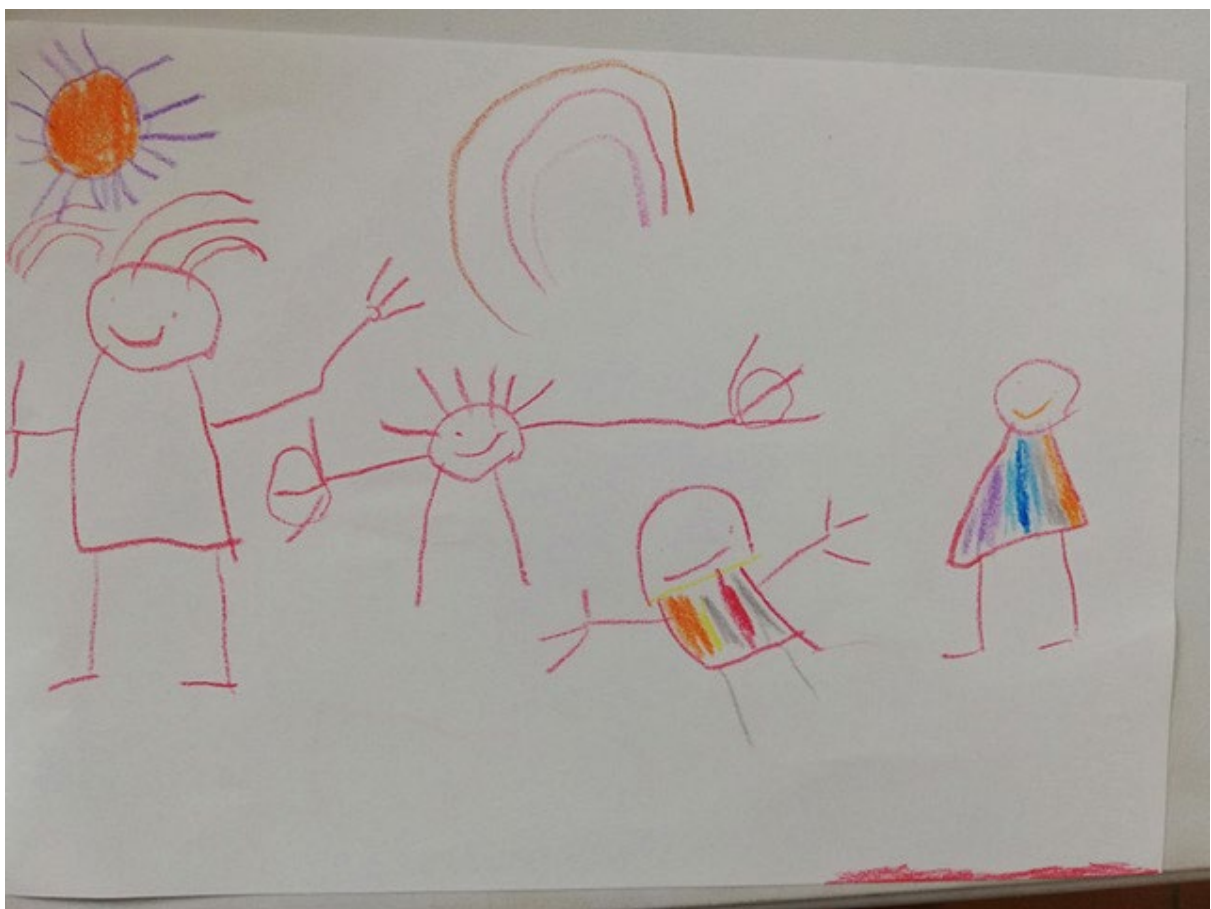
Ways in which child participation can be supported at home include helping with chores, and homework, asking about the child's day, playing games, sharing stories and listening. Given that many children and adults live in traumatic circumstances, however, this needs a lot of support. In addition, many parents were voiceless themselves and have low self-esteem and confidence and there was a sense that young mothers were at times spoken to as if their opinions and feeling were not important. On top of this, there is a lack of trust between various groups in the community, with some feeling unable to influence decision-making processes.

Despite these challenges, we were told that children are more assertive at home, that they share what they have done at pre-school during the day; also that they make their wishes known to the teachers, such as not wanting to sleep during rest time.

Children's perspectives

Most children reported that they were happy with everything in the pre-school but do not have a sense of choice as the teachers tell them what to do. Some described feeling angry when forced to do something they did not want to do – with one saying emphatically *“If I am asked to do dangerous things, I say no. No one can just force me to do things I do not want to do!”*

Figure 3: A five-year-old boy, drew his family as a happy safe space where he felt involved and heard



Children nonetheless demonstrated agency in how they responded to the conversations with the research facilitators, changing the topic, demanding a drink of water or demanding to go to the toilet.

The interplay between safety and participation was seen in many descriptions of how they could not play outside and participate in the wider community due to safety concerns.

How do these understandings of participation link with ECD policy?

The Children's Act (Section 10) in South Africa recognises the child's right to participate in an appropriate way and for the views they express to be given proper consideration. Respect for the child's views requires that adults adopt a child-centred approach and attitude, listen to children and respect their dignity (NIECD policy). Supporting this, the ECD curriculum guidelines encourage adults to take children's interactions and explorations seriously, as these are crucial both for learning but also for self-expression (National Curriculum Framework).

While in principle adults understand what participation rights are, these are not often practiced. This is because of community values and cultural norms about the position of adults being above children. Parents themselves have little voice and experience of participation. There are also limitations to participation given a lack of resources, large classes and the lack of local safety conditions.

Key messages about participation

1. The concept of participation was difficult for parents and some practitioners to understand, possibly because of **firmly set perceptions of the position of children being below adults**.
2. Practitioners and community organisations understood the legal and policy requirements for children to be heard in matters concerning them, but signalled the need to balance this with cultural expectations of child and adult roles, as well as to create **a balance between adult guidance and child choice**.
3. Parents felt that they had little voice and **limited opportunities to participate in their own lives** and in the early learning programmes attended by their children.
4. **Safety concerns** for children limited how much they could freely participate outside of the home.
5. Children showed **a good amount of agency in how they behaved**, but explained that they had limited opportunities for choice in their early learning programmes.



LEARNINGS FROM ENGAGEMENT IN THE STUDY PROCESSES

The process of co-creating meanings of the key concepts and of planning the study with the Community Advisory Committee, identified the value of meeting in this kind of forum and the need for continued co-ordination of a broader group of ECD stakeholders.

In May 2023, True North and the Advisory Committee hosted SIPP project team members from Edinburgh, Brazil, eSwatini and Palestine in Vrygrond, to introduce them to the community and to share the work each country is doing. This provided an opportunity to recognise the approach of True North and the knowledge and interventions of Community Advisory Committee members.

OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN SAFE INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATORY PEDAGOGY: NEXT STEPS

Together with the community partner True North and the Advisory Committee, we have so far developed:

1. This community report that consolidates key findings from the participatory research project
2. A **Community Action Plan** that includes activities and doable solutions to support safe, inclusive, participatory early learning in Vrygrond, now and in the future. This action plan was based on the key issues identified in the data collected and through discussions with the Advisory Committee, drawing on their lived experiences in the community and their knowledge of the early learning needs in the Vrygrond community.
3. We will hold a broader stakeholder engagement event to **present these documents and the learnings** from the SIPP project to ECD stakeholders, local and provincial – with the aim of moving safe, inclusive, participatory early learning forward, both in Vrygrond and in other areas.

We have developed and are still developing materials for distribution, including

- a guide for parents about what to look for when selecting an ECD centre; and
- packs of South African children's books which can be used to discuss safety, inclusion and participation for ECD centres and non-centre-based ECD programmes in Vrygrond/Overcome Heights.



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