



Safe, Inclusive
Participative Pedagogy:
Improving Early
Childhood Education

Learning from a Community in South Africa

This briefing paper focuses on findings from South Africa, where a participatory research process at community level enabled the development of a strategic plan of action to improve early learning for young children. In this briefing paper we focus attention on community partnerships in research for early learning.

This briefing describes the process of stakeholder participation and partnership at community level that informed data collection and reflection on important elements of early learning and then generated a plan of action to address gaps. It illustrates the critical importance of giving effect to the policy principle of ‘appreciative promotion of existing resources and knowledge’ for contextually appropriate service improvement.

The research was part of the Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy (SIPP): Improving Early Childhood Education research project. It aims to identify and develop safe, inclusive and participative pedagogy, which is implementable and sustainable for communities where children experience particular stress and trauma. SIPP is a partnership project, working with research teams in each of the fieldwork countries (Brazil, Eswatini, Palestine and South Africa) and led by the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

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Key messages:

- Building ownership and agency is important. A supported participatory process allows community stakeholders to surface their priorities for early learning.
- Community ownership builds buy in and commitment by ensuring that policy implementation responds to local values and needs and builds on local knowledge, skills and systems.
- Communities can pull together to support and develop early learning. While communities depend on government for sustainable early learning resourcing, communities are also working together with multiple stakeholders, including NGO partners, in a variety of innovative ways to support early learning in their own community. Communities can pull together for the benefit of children beyond what government is offering and are currently doing so.
- Significant change can take place at local level. Effective local level delivery systems can and should be responsive to the concerns and priorities of beneficiaries and service implementers. The SIPP Project approach is a way of engaging these (especially the early childhood education work force and parents) which district and provincial officials could achieve through partnership with local Early Childhood Development forums and NGOs.

Learning from a Community in South Africa: Community participation in improving early childhood learning in Vrygrond, South Africa

The South African National Integrated Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy (Republic of South Africa, 2015) and related provisions recognise the importance of providing opportunities for learning through a range of age differentiated delivery models and equitable provision, taking account of different vulnerabilities including under-resourcing, special needs and other marginalised groups. Policy formulation is a national competence, while implementation is a provincial and ultimately local function. It is at local level where change happens most significantly and “designing inclusive local structures that purposefully connect and collaborate with state infrastructure is a key strategy for advancing equity” (Ponder & Ames, 5:2021). Through such interactions and negotiations, policy can be effectively implemented, with buy in from those on the ground. Engaging with stakeholders provides a reality check allowing “avoiding obstacles and changing course if some measures do not align with local needs” (Viennet & Pont, 38:2017).

The perspective of the South African government and civil society leaders interviewed for the SIPP research suggests mostly that local level stakeholders and beneficiaries have little influence on the policy process, either formulation at national level or local implementation. It was however recognised that some civil society campaigns have recently begun to provide a forum for principals and practitioners but not necessarily that this had been influential, illustrated in the perspectives shared below.

“The biggest influencer of policy is actually the government, because they have marching orders and they have an agenda. Civil society has not as much influence as they might believe and even less for community and parents. I cannot think that there were any processes...that have been influenced by parents and practitioners in any manner that has made a notable impact.” (Multilateral representative)

“Parents, as well as ECD practitioners or the workforce, have had very minimal influence on policy - by no fault of their own it’s quite difficult to be engaged at a policy level when you are living hand to mouth.” (National NGO Collective)

“The most important stakeholders, which are the children, parents, the providers of these services, there does not seem to be, there hasn’t been good organisation of those voices.” (Legal advocacy group)

A Participative Case Study

Vrygrond, near Cape Town, was the site chosen for a local level case study. Vrygrond is similar in many ways to other poorly resourced communities in South Africa. Vrygrond is a densely populated and vibrant area with a taxi rank, informal traders

and small businesses of different kinds, but there is also high unemployment and poverty as well as social challenges such as crime and violence, domestic violence and substance abuse. There is no police station or clinic in the community; services are however available in adjacent communities.

Civil society is active with many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) supporting infrastructure and rendering services, a community library, and education services, as well as two primary schools. Early Childhood Development programmes include 35 ECD centres, attended by 1,700 children. In addition, other NGOs offer part time programmes for a small number of parents and young children. Around two thirds of young children in the area do not have access to organised ECD programmes. ECD programmes are members of an active ECD forum and True North, an ECD NGO, provides support and development opportunities for ECD programmes in the area.

The Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy Project (SIPP) provided an opportunity to explore the experiences of local stakeholders and to learn from them which aspects of ECE policy implementation worked and which did not.

Approach and Information Gathering

When the SIPP project started, the Children's Institute from the University of Cape Town approached True North, the leading ECD Resource and Training Organisation in the area, to partner on the case study. True North, which follows a participatory community development approach, then contacted the ECD Forum Executive to establish their interest and support.

True North assisted with establishing a community Advisory Committee to guide the intervention. This included members of the ECD Forum, the Vrygrond Community Development Trust ECD representative, True North, and other local NGOs whose interventions included services to young children.

Role of the Advisory Committee

Meetings of the committee over several months explored local understandings of safety, inclusion and participation, the three underpinning concepts of the SIPP project. This informed the framing of questions and testing of methods for interviews and focus groups and helped identify and connect with relevant stakeholders for participatory discussions. Young children were a stakeholder group and members of the Advisory Group helped fine tune the methods and questions for conversations with them. Post data gathering, the Advisory Group reviewed and commented on emerging findings and the team facilitated their development of a Community Action Plan based on these discussions.

Participatory Information Gathering

As well as the Advisory Group, there were consultations with the ward councillor, two faith-based social service organisations, ECD centre principals and practitioners, two principals in leadership roles in the ECD Forum, parents who had children at ECD centres and some in parenting programmes, as well as small groups of children. Methods included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, mapping and visualisations. For the children's groups, persona doll stories on the key concepts were the main stimulus to conversations and children also drew and discussed pictures about what had been important to them in the sessions.

Key findings

Stakeholders identified a range of findings regarding safety, inclusion and participation in early learning practices within Vrygrond.

Safety

There was a general lack of physical and emotional safety for children, including in a small minority of ECD centres which stakeholders reported had too few and untrained staff or poor infrastructure. Some homes were not safe, with substance abuse, economic hardship, domestic violence and child neglect as key risks to young children's development. Some children were treated harshly at home. Many children roamed the streets, at risk of car accidents and community violence, gangs controlled the parks, and there were environmental risks, including garbage dumping. Children were at greater risk on weekends when there were no facilities or safe spaces for them. Staff and community organisations stressed the importance of emotional safety, recognising signs of trauma and paying attention to keeping children mentally and socially well.

Due to these general concerns for children's safety, caregivers and parents reported taking care to protect them by accompanying them out or keeping them at home or sending them to ECD centres which were also seen as safe. For their part, principals and practitioners emphasised physical safety precautions such as fire drills, controlled access to the premises and only allowing responsible adults to collect children. They also provided many examples of making sure children felt loved and supported to explore and try new things. Children we engaged in conversations about safety felt that their homes and ECD centres, as well as some community projects, were safe spaces. When they felt unsafe, their parents and ECD practitioners were trusted sources of comfort and protection.

Inclusion

There were insufficient ECD services to respond to the needs of all young children living in

Vrygrond. Failure of government to provide infrastructure and operational finances was a common concern. Barriers to access to ECD centres included lack of finance to pay the fees, parents having different priorities, child neglect, centre registration requirements, and lack of child identity documents. Generally, ECD centres struggled with inclusive early learning practice due to lack of resources, the need for additional practitioner training and implementation support, and language barriers. Certain groups of children were identified as more likely to be excluded, including children with disabilities.

Barriers and concerns were evident from ECD staff that they could not provide adequate support for children with disabilities. Amongst other things, this was due to lack of staff confidence, feeling overwhelmed, staff shortages and the need for more training and support. ECD staff highlighted that in their experience, it was tough and required more time and support to practice effective inclusion of children with disabilities. However, examples were given of addressing other inclusion factors such as language barriers through learning children's home languages, using persona dolls to address issues of exclusion and bullying, and allowing leeway for parents who could not pay fees.

Participation

Stakeholders emphasised that young children need to feel safe to participate meaningfully in learning activities. Language barriers, low self-esteem, and trauma restrict participation. Adults often engage with children from an adult-centric position and a change in their positioning of young children is needed. Children's participation in decision making was not a parent priority, partly because of cultural norms but also because providing for basic needs such as safety and nutrition were perceived as more urgent. Practitioners often applied a rigid approach to the ECE programme directing all the activities, due to prevailing attitudes that children learn by being told, or lack of confidence, restricting children's opportunities to play and make choices. Parents also felt powerless due to limited opportunities to exercise their own agency within the community; this in turn restricted their ability to promote child participation.

ECD staff described several strategies that encourage child participation, including children telling their own stories, having freedom of choice, bringing items from home for theme tables and the fantasy area, and book sharing. Parents were encouraged to have conversations with children, use home chores as playful learning opportunities, talk about the child's day and share stories. Staff also explained how they involved parents in decisions about children's early learning, such as finding out their priorities for young children, exposing parents to the ECE programme.

Towards an action plan

Based on the findings above, the research team and the Vrygrond Advisory Group collaborated through stakeholder workshops, drawing on the data collected and the lived experiences of the Advisory Group, to identify priority areas and develop a vision and a set of practical recommendations and actions to be taken to support and strengthen the Vrygrond ECD community to promote better outcomes for young children and their caregivers.

To inform the action plan in each of the priority areas, the following were identified:

- The key challenge within the priority area
- Discussion on what key interventions might serve the local ECD community
- Expected goals to be achieved by intervening in the priority area
- Resources and/or systems that are already in place to support these activities in Vrygrond
- Actors already working on these activities in Vrygrond, and who else could potentially be drawn in
- Specific activities, timeline and responsibilities.

Stakeholders' Guiding Vision for ECE in Vrygrond

We desire a Vrygrond community where every young child is valued and understood to have a unique personality and potential for growth. We strive to be a community where young children are accepted and nurtured during each stage of development, and where their voices are heard. We desire to create a warm, inclusive community atmosphere where all families with young children feel motivated to genuinely collaborate with health and community workers, ECD teachers, programme leaders, services and organisations and are supported to provide healthy and safe environments within Vrygrond, to ensure each young child is well-nourished, protected from harm and their development is promoted. We especially aspire to ensure that every young child, regardless of race, gender, ability, social status or other exclusionary factors, is able to participate in the services and support programmes available in Vrygrond. We strive to be a community that understands the importance of creating stimulating environments and the critical value of quality early childhood education, in family homes and in out-of-home settings.

What needs to be done?

Stakeholders identified the following immediate priorities areas that they would seek to action:

1. Supporting parents to develop nurturing, healthy relationships with their young children and with ECD centres or programmes in Vrygrond.

- To include parents in fun and engaging information sessions and workshops at

individual ECD centres;

- To support the mental health of parents through expert monthly trauma support for parents.

2. Supporting ECD practitioner development and well-being to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

- To include a specific focus on recognising and responding to developmental delay and disability through an awareness raising campaign on recognising delay, involving the ECD forum;
- To promote one-on-one support for parents and practitioners through existing or new special programmes targeted at assisting at risk children and lobbying the provincial education department to extend these services to all ECD programmes in Vrygrond.
- To enable teacher/practitioner support through the development of an ECD Information Hub, small support groups, and making links for community service providers to provide counselling, personal growth courses and encouraging team building in ECD centres.

3. Strengthening community-level relationships to enhance information sharing and collaboration among ECD service providers and stakeholders, and the broader community

- To include convening community dialogues to share ideas and priorities, and work towards resolutions of common problems;
- To create an ECD Information Hub with services available to young children and families in Vrygrond;
- To clarify and share service pathways and use information to lobby with government for improved services for young children and families.

Impact of SIPP project to date

Although the Action Plan has not, as yet, been broadly disseminated, the participatory project process has already generated some action. Firstly, the participatory meetings of the Advisory Group signalled the need for greater sharing of referrals between different organisations working to improve conditions for young children. Secondly, in response to the lack of safe play spaces for children, partners and their donors have set up a safe communal play park at the Community Centre and a Food and Eco-Garden. ECD centres and programmes and other children's groups can book time in these. A second play park is planned. The SIPP project funded the production of a handout for parents on what to look for when selecting a quality ECD Centre for their children, which was used at an Indaba/Consultative Meeting for parents in October 2023, one of the planned parent support activities.

Effective local level delivery systems are responsive to the concerns and priorities

of beneficiaries and service implementers. The SIPP Project approach is a way of engaging the beneficiaries and implementers (especially the ECE workforce and parents), which district and provincial officials could achieve through partnership with local forums and NGOs. A next step will be to engage with authorities and the broader community, with further important messages for policy implementation.

Learning for Policy Implementers

1. A supported participatory process allows for community stakeholders to develop a common vision for ECE, and to surface important issues that are feasible to address for early learning, which builds ownership and agency.
2. While communities depend on government for early learning resourcing, communities are also working together with multiple stakeholders in a variety of innovative ways to support early learning in their own community. They are thus pulling together for the benefit of children beyond what government is offering.
3. The issues Vrygrond ECE stakeholders raise as important to them have both been central in ECE policy and/ or recent ECE studies in South Africa. For example,
 - The lack of a truly inclusive approach for children with delays and disabilities, despite their priority in policy
 - Fees to attend local early learning centres limit the inclusion of children whose parents do not have money to pay
 - The need for practitioners to be supported at a personal level has not had much attention from the education authorities, who have focused on qualifications and training, but has shown up as significant in local quality studies (Biersteker et al., 2024; Henry & Giese, 2023).

Want to know more about SIPP?

Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy (SIPP): Improving Early Childhood Education (2020-24) is a mixed-methods research project. It has undertaken early years education policy and systems analysis in the four fieldwork countries (Brazil, Eswatini, Palestine and South Africa) and in-depth community case studies with young children, their families and early years stakeholders. Filling a research gap, international systematic literature reviews explore the prevalence and burden of early childhood violence. The project focuses on children and their families under the age of 5 because children below compulsory school age are the least likely to be provided with education and learning opportunities.

SIPP has produced a series of briefings, including one that details its methodology. For these and other information, visit:
www.sipp.education.ed.ac.uk

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