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# Voices heard and lessons learnt: Exploring multiple knowledges and local participation in a community-based integrated early childhood development project in rural South Africa

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*Abstract:* Following calls for diverse and contextual perspectives of the rich lives of young children, their families and communities from/in the Global South, this paper presents critical reflections emerging from a three-year (2016-2019) community-based Integrated Approach to Early Childhood Development (ECD) project implemented in the rural Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. It explores the critical relationship established between a range of stakeholders involved in this project as reflected on by two community activists working together in the area of early childhood in the province for thirty years. This article highlights the importance of situating any community development initiative aimed at addressing early childhood provision in marginalised communities within a social justice framework. This includes identifying constraints inherent in unequal relations of power that risk undermining solidarity and agency for community stakeholders. It foregrounds accountability measures that emerge from local initiatives rather than from narrow predetermined project outcomes. This provides an opportunity to learn from, and engage with, experiences from the margins, thereby challenging some dominant narratives circulating, and often informing, early childhood policy and provision.

*Key words:* early childhood, community participation, South Africa, non-profit organisations, power relations.

## Introduction

*“Social justice and inequality is a very old theme, but one which seems to have taken on a new urgency, as globalization – and global economies and global communications – intensifies to ever greater levels” (Penn, 2005: xii).*

The long historical relationship between global and local ideas of early childhood care and education (ECCE) has emerged strongly in the current great global interest in the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (Campbell-Barr & Bogatić, 2017; Pérez & Saveedra, 2017; Ebrahim, Okwany & Barry, 2019). In South Africa, Rudolph (2017, p. 78) notes that “Early Childhood Development (ECD) has slowly gained legitimacy during the 20 years of democratic rule” through its identification as a national priority in the government’s National Development Plan (NDP) published in 2011, the development of a National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (RSA, 2015), the South African National Curriculum Framework for children from Birth to Four (NCF) (Department of Basic Education, 2015). Recently South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced that responsibility for early childhood development (ECD) centres will migrate from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education with the aim of moving towards “two years compulsory ECD for all children before they enter Grade One” (Ramaphosa, 2019). This migration of departmental responsibility for ECD is “motivated by the understanding that education should be uniform and continuous” and strongly focused on ‘early learning’ (J. Murray, personal communication, 14 February 2019) in order to “improve the quality of education in the country” (Kubheka, 2019).

Similar to those identified elsewhere around the world (see Adrian, 2018, Lightfoot-Rueda, 2018, Viruru, 2005, Penn, 2005) Rudolph (2017) highlights how dominant global discourses of ECEC/ECD are constructing early childhood policy and practice in South Africa. She cites a range of examples, including “narrow notions of evidence, western child development, understanding of the child as return of investment and referencing urban middle-class community contexts and values” (Rudolph, 2017, p. 77). While ‘early learning’ is certainly a key component of early childhood programmes and projects, in a country characterised by a deeply troubled socio-political past with continuing, persistent educational and economic inequality, early childhood has been highlighted as an important vector for empowerment and economic and social transformation more broadly.

Currently 12.8 million (65%) children in South Africa are living below the “upper bound” poverty line (with a per capita income below R1,138<sup>1</sup> per month) signalling the very high rates of child poverty that characterise the country (Hall & Sambu, 2018, p. 138). Poverty rates across the nine provinces that make up the country are substantially different. In the Eastern Cape Province 79.6% of children live in income poor households (Hall & Sambu, 2018). Child poverty is most prevalent in the rural areas of the former homelands<sup>2</sup> where 86% of children live below the poverty line compared to 51% of children in urban areas (Hall & Sambu, 2018). The Department of Social Development provides some financial assistance through the disbursement of the Child Support Grant (CSG)<sup>3</sup>. As Hall & Sambu (2018, p. 139) note, “[I]ntroduced in 1998...the CSG has become the single biggest programme for alleviating child poverty in South Africa”. Increasing access to early childhood provision is therefore entangled with a range of other structural and systemic inequalities that reinforce the need to carefully trace the relationship between the communities in which early childhood services are located and the ways in which the need for these services are identified and supported. These services include increasing access to healthcare, education, safety and protection, and nutrition.

This article presents the reflections and actions of two community workers tasked with implementing the three-year Integrated Approach to Early Childhood Development (IAECD) project across three marginalised communities in rural parts of the Eastern Cape Province. Findings identify the importance of establishing transversal (rather than horizontal) collaborative partnerships among a range of project stakeholders such as diverse community members, NPO service providers, and the project funder. The findings highlight the value of careful and critical deconstruction of the epistemological frameworks and practices that shape ‘ways of knowing and doing early childhood’ (Ebrahim, 2012, p. 80) in marginalised communities. Local, contextualised early childhood projects such as the IEACD serve to counter the dominant and historical “reliance on technocratic [early childhood] interventions and a justification for intervention that mostly draws on questionable paradigms of poverty” (Penn, 2005, p. xii) and narrow discourses of early

<sup>1</sup> Approximate conversion as of February 2019: €72

<sup>2</sup> Established by the apartheid government, these were designated areas established to segregate so-called ethnically homogenous groups to permit self-governance. Approximately 3.5 million people were evicted, often forcefully from their homes and relocated to homelands (Ross, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> This consists of a monthly payment of R410 (€26) made to those who 1) care for children 18 years or under, and 2) meet income threshold (R4,100 (€258) for single caregiver, and R8,200 (€516) for married caregivers) (Hall & Sambu, 2018).

childhood as principally about ‘early learning’. Through an action learning approach we seek to understand these communities as complex contexts where race, class and culture intersect to inform understandings of young children and their belonging in a diverse South Africa (Rudolph, 2017).

## **Early Childhood Provision in South Africa: The Role of Non-Profit Organisations**

Across South Africa, non-profit organisations (NPOs) remain key providers of a range of services and projects improving access to, and the quality of, early childhood services for young children and their families living in marginalised communities (Atmore, Van Niekerk & Ashley-Cooper, 2012). As Penn (1997) notes, these organisations were historically established to offer training and support to early childhood educators and developed a range of programmes and resources to support their work. Given the scope of challenges facing these communities, early childhood encompasses not only the provision of education and care to young children, but a range of services that fall within a ‘community development’ framework. The practice of community development is, according to Bhattacharyya (2004, p. 5) “different from other endeavours in that it aims at building solidarity and agency by adhering to three practice principles, namely, self-help, felt needs, and participation.” The way this is achieved in practice is undoubtedly highly variable and largely dependent on each NPOs commitment to addressing social injustice and inequality in marginalised communities.

In relation to early childhood NPOs, Penn (2019, p. 6) states that a commonly held perception is that:

[A]n organisation that provides some kind of service for young children is per se undertaking an equitable act, whatever the origins and mode of conduct of the organisation and whatever the wider circumstances in which it operates. Intervention in early childhood is deemed to be so important in improving the life chances of any child that niceties of procedure and programming are overlooked.

It cannot, as Penn warns, be taken-for-granted that early childhood interventions are necessarily empowering young children and their families. Without critical reflection on the “niceties of procedure and programming” there are risks that such projects serve to further marginalise project stakeholders. Taking heed of Penn’s concern here, coupled with the knowledge

that “Early childhood development, education and care programmes don’t exist in a vacuum’ (Urban, Cardini & Romero, 2018, p. 3), early childhood service providers are tasked with highlighting the challenges and possibilities inherent in privileging local knowledge production and meaning-making, and the building of trust, solidarity and agency. As Moss (2013, p. 371) contends, “Good [Early Childhood Education and Care] systems...are products of more democratic, more egalitarian, more solidaristic societies – qualities which are themselves good for children and adults alike.” Thus, as Penn (2005, p. 44) stresses, “It is important that any policies or practical initiatives to help [marginalised communities] do not make things worse rather than better”. Without a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the interconnected dimensions of knowledge(s), practices and values (Urban et al., 2018) as relates to early childhood projects, there is little scope for the establishment of collective activism and sense of responsibility to ensure that early childhood projects are both sustainable and centred on local, culturally informed, ways of life. The focus of this paper is not the diverse range of programmes that comprise the IAECD project, but rather the broader issues that need to be considered when conceptualising and implementing such a project. As Urban et al. (2018, p. 6-7) point out:

It is a crucial task to enable systematic encounters and democratic dialogue between all stakeholders in order to raise awareness of our own and others’ values, and to work towards a shared orientation towards rights, equality, and social justice for all children and families...Education, primary healthcare, nutrition, children’s rights, social cohesion, equality and other aspects that contribute to the ECD/ECEC system are often grounded in different, and not necessarily matching, conceptualisations, understandings, terminologies and accepted practices.

## Theoretical Framework

Tracing the contours of the ‘new conditions of the times’ (Malaguzzi, 1969 cited in Moss, 2018) in which early childhood provision is situated both globally, and in South Africa specifically, requires critical engagement with diverse theoretical perspectives and concepts. Drawing on the work of postcolonial and reconceptualist scholars (Freire, 1994; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Viruru, 2005; Arndt, 2012), critical theory (Giroux, 2009), and international perspectives on community work (Larsen, Sewpaul & Hole, 2014), notions of power, solidarity and agency are usefully employed to frame an analysis of particular community development practices as relates to the IAECD project.

Highlighting the need for careful and critical engagement with the notion of ‘community development’, Freire’s work points directly to the need for communities to clarify for themselves what their dreams are and, of course, how to put them into action (De Figueiredo-Cowen & Gastaldo, 1995). This gives rise to the importance of creating critical conditions in which these questions might emerge, where dreams can be articulated and spaces and relations (re)discovered to translate these dreams into action. Some of these critical conditions would include participation in conceptualising, implementing and evaluating community development projects, while simultaneously acknowledging that “participation is always related to power” (Larsen, Sewpaul & Hole, 2014, p. 7). The careful inspection of these established hierarchies of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1982), shaped historically through experiences of colonial and apartheid ideology and discourses, and more recently by neoliberal forces, sheds light on the unequal and unjust set of broader social, cultural, economic and political relations that directly give form to local lived experiences of young children and those around them. A view of power as ‘a multiplicity of force relations’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 92) helps identify how it is constituted through action and works to frame “the boundaries of possibility that govern action” (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006, p. 73).

What exactly is meant by the term ‘community’ warrants further conceptualisation. As Arndt (2012, p. 23) notes, “[C]ommunity is crucial to social and political life” and can be conceptualised in a number of ways, including as an entity or as an encounter. The notion of community might be viewed as an entity seen as representing a particular group of people (Arndt, 2012). However, drawing on the work of Todd (2004), Arndt (2012, p. 29) highlights how the concept of community might be seen “as an encounter, as a “responsible mode of social togetherness” (Todd, 2004, p. 337). Todd (2004, p. 337) herself draws on the work of Emmanuel Levinas to show an understanding of community “as a signifying encounter with difference that is not founded upon knowledge about the other, but upon a being-for and feeling-for the other”. Yet, in community work there is the obligation to act, to work in systematic ways as a “force against a [neoliberal] market that is completely hostile to excluded people” (Astray, Alonso & Alonso, 2014, p. 38). All actors are important as community work “move[s] into communities and [tries] to build from the bottom-up instead of from the top-down as before” (Astray, Alonso & Alonso, 2014, p. 38). Thus, community might be conceptualised as an encounter and as “a moment of signification through which subjects enact a form of social togetherness” (Todd, 2004, p. 340), for example through the avenue of ‘early childhood’.

Here Bhattacharyya's (2004) discussion of the need to promote solidarity and agency is relevant and useful. He proposes that solidarity is based upon shared interests and or/circumstances in the face of a complex range of inequalities facing individuals. Importantly, erosions of solidarity at the macro-level (for example, fraught historical processes, large-scale poverty etc.) are mirrored in every social space (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 17) and therefore need to be addressed at the local level in order to increase potential for action. Individuals are agentic, albeit they are heavily constrained by structural and systemic inequalities (Bhattacharyya, 2004). Thus, counteracting locally specific historic processes of erosion of agency (Bhattacharyya, 2004) is entangled with "what people believe they can do and change, however small and non-confrontational those actions are" (Penn, 2005, p. xiii). Agency is especially important in situations of poverty as Munyakho (1992, p. 1, cited in Penn, 2005, p. 21) writes: "poverty is compounded by a sense of powerlessness, of exclusion, of lack of a rightful place that accompanies the failure of some of their expectations and their lack of access to the resources they need or consider they have a right to". Viewing the notion of 'community' as an act of encounter acknowledges the integral part that power plays. Thus, "patterns of power" become "familiar and normalised in a community, and conversely, become disrupted by change (MacEinri, 1994)" (Arndt, 2012, p. 29). The IAECD project, centred on mobilising the community around the needs of its youngest citizens, resulted in a "redefinition of power relations and interpersonal encounters (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007)" (Arndt, 2012, p. 29).

Larsen, Sewpaul & Hole (2014, p. 10) note that "critical reflection and reflexivity is an important part of community work both for the community worker and for the people involved in projects". Critical reflexivity is defined as questioning "one's own practice as a community worker...to understand on what ground one's decisions are taken and what ideas and concerns are leading to one's actions" (Larsen, Sewpaul & Hole, 2014, p. 10). Viruru (2005) asserts that within a postcolonial framing it needs to be understood that the colonized experience continues to constrain how those "subjected to oppressive conditions" are viewed and treated, and that to seek social transformation requires adopting an activist position" (Viruru, 2005, p. 14). It is perhaps to this awakening of the activist position that this article speaks most, especially in relation to those who have historically held power in community development work – the funder or donor, as well as the service provider tasked with conceptualising and implementing the project. This discussion suggests that community workers might come to position themselves as 'border crossers' throughout the project lifespan. As Giroux (2009,

p. 80) notes, “becoming a border crosser engaged in a productive dialogue with others means producing a space in which those dominant social relations, ideologies, and practices that erase the specificity of the voice of the other must be challenged and overcome”. This can be a challenging endeavour as “the role of community worker is multifaceted and demands complex skills.” (Larsen & Hole, 2014, p. 94). It is in this capacity as ‘border crosser’ – most notably with regards to the community worker as working at the intersection of the funder/NPO/community interface that raises “questions about established or ongoing practice, the issues at stake and what contributes to the challenges that people meet in their community” (Larsen, Sewpaul & Hole, 2014, p. 10).

## Methodology

This article draws on some of the findings generated by a critical action inquiry approach that afforded the opportunity to undertake research ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ (Heron & Reason, 2006) two community workers involved in this study. Through co-operative inquiry opportunities were created to foster “understanding, reflection and action” (Lather, 2012, p. 555) on the unexpected, and exciting, experiences of solidarity and agency that began to emerge during the design and implementation of the IAECD project. This prompted two community workers to seek ways to “create new understandings by making conscious the social, political, professional, economic and ethical assumptions constraining or supporting individual and collective action in a specific context” (Trehan, 2011, p. 187). A key part of action inquiry is the element of critical reflection. As Larsen, Sewpaul and Hole (2014, p. 10) note, critical reflexivity is defined as questioning “one’s own practice as a community worker...to understand on what ground one’s decisions are taken and what ideas and concerns are leading to one’s actions” (Larsen, Sewpaul & Hole, 2014, p. 10). To facilitate critical reflexivity, the first author was approached to take on the role of ‘critical friend’ to facilitate the community workers’ cycles of reflection and action in the IAECD project. She has worked in the early childhood development NPO sector in South Africa and her role as ‘critical friend’ emerges from her long-standing relationship with the community workers in question and a deep, shared commitment to work towards “a more ethical world based on principles of social justice” (Rallis & Rossman, 2000, p. 84). Yet, having moved into a position of research and teaching on early childhood in the Global South, her position as critical friend meant that she provided another lens through which to interpret what was emerging in the IAECD project. As Costa and Kallick (1993, p. 50) describe, ‘A critical friend, as the name suggests, is a trusted person who

asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens...”. This configuration was powerful as it was underpinned by a deeply reflective approach whereby the author and the community workers’ understanding of advocacy work in the field of early childhood was both problematized and enriched.

From January 2016, bi-monthly detailed conversations and semi-structured interviews were held with one or both of the community workers and provides data for this article. This was complemented with document analysis drawing on annual and quarterly reports to the IAECD project funder, interviews with a diverse range of members from across the three communities that comprise the IEACD project (undertaken by the two community workers). We regularly returned to common themes that emerged during our conversations, interviews and through document analysis. These raised questions about:

- Who has the power to define what early childhood provision looks like at the local level?
- How is the notion of ‘community’ conceptualised in the IAECD project?
- How might community work in the field of early childhood privilege local knowledge production/knowledge making processes (and thereby resist knowledge transfer processes)?
- How are these processes shaped by broader relations of power and politics?
- How might the IAECD project open up possibilities to create ‘a place of encounter for all citizens, children and adults alike’ (Moss, 2013, p. 45)?

A key starting point for our ‘productive dialogue’ (Rallis & Rossman, 2000, p. 84) was the recognition that knowledges is/are produced and co-constructed: it/they are not given. This was helpful in recognising the importance of political choices in early childhood programmes (Moss, 2017). The action research spiral (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) was useful in planning our cycles of action and reflection. The process consisted of the community workers highlighting key actions in relation to a particular part of the IAECD projects, which would then become the focus of our dialogic inquiry. For example, in one conversation the community workers agreed that:

The underlying assumption that has infused much of our NPO ethos (in this geographical area) has been that power needs to rest with the NPO in early childhood projects in terms of conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation. However, drawing on the ideas of action

research and learning as inspired by, for example, Freire (1970) and others, the IAECD project has opened up opportunities for a different approach with unexpected outcomes. This is closely tied up with relations of power – who holds it – as well as spaces, or lack thereof, to allow a range of community stakeholders to have a voice. (Community worker 1)

This discussion is a reflection of particular actions taken in the IAECD project, which in turn generated further points of reflection that were de(re)constructed in subsequent conversations, informing further actions. Thus, “the specific purpose of reflective process is to expose or unsettle dominant assumptions with the expressed purpose of challenging and changing dominant power relations” (Fook & Askeland, 2006, p. 47).

## Research Setting: Contextualising the IAECD Project

The IAECD project was implemented in three communities in the northern reaches of the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. These communities fall under a single ward<sup>4</sup>. Approximately 16 000 people, predominantly black African, live in these communities, of which 1861 are young children (5 years and younger)<sup>5</sup>. According to provincial data 57% of children six years and under live in homes without access to piped water, 36% live in households with no toilet, 57% receive early antenatal care visits, and 13% are born in public facilities weighing below 2.5kg (Hall, Sambu, Berry, Giese & Almeleh, 2017).

In 2015 a Scandinavian funder provided the resources to build an early childhood education centre in one of the communities creating tension with the remaining two communities in the area. This experience prompted the funder to approach the two experienced community workers (employed by Longhill NPO) to explore how available funding could be channelled into early childhood services across all three communities. This initiated a lengthy consultative process with a range of community stakeholders to identify the early childhood needs and available resources within these communities. The community workers adopted a participatory rural appraisal (PAR) approach.

Several standard PAR strategies were used, including, transect walk, community stakeholder meetings, social mapping and door-to door house visits.

<sup>4</sup> Smallest local government unit

<sup>5</sup> Statistics drawn from local clinic figures and are approximate.

In order to get to know each of the communities, the community workers and funder community liaison officer undertook a transect walk in each of the three communities before holding a one-day workshop. They observed the surroundings during the transect walk and stopped to talk to people they met about early childhood matters. They wanted to find out “how it works” for a range of different community members in each of the sites. This helped them to focus discussion in the workshops. Questions centred on establishing what early childhood services were already available in the respective communities, how accessible these services were and what the main reasons for non-participation were.

The next phase of the process, undertaken by service providers with community workers and volunteers from the three communities, consisted of social mapping and door-to-door house visits. Social mapping is a tool used as a springboard for community discussions about inequalities, social problems and coping strategies. Following the social mapping and then throughout the project families identified as marginalised were visited in their homes in order to encourage them to participate in the various programmes offered as part of the IAECD project. Available programmes were described and personal invitations issued in a bid to start forging a relationship with each family. The choice to participate on all or any or none of the programmes was up to the potential participant – if done sensitively they invariably wanted to be part of something that recognized them as people – worthy of time, effort and investment

Through this approach the community workers were able to establish relationships with a range of community members. This facilitated the mobilisation of key stakeholders and structures within that community and the identification, by the respective communities, of the nature and scope of early childhood services most needed by young children and their families. The PRA approach generated a range of shared constraints across the three communities. A high percentage of children did not have access to early childhood education services (approximately 1024 out of 1861 children). These self-described socially fragmented communities highlighted a number of child-headed households or grandmothers caring for young children without receiving the child support grant. Overcrowding and high dropout rates in local primary schools, high rates of alcoholism, foetal alcohol syndrome and unemployment. The Department of Education automatically removed a child’s name from school enrolment after ten days if no accompanying identification documentation was presented. A range of individuals also expressed frustration at their inability to intervene in situ-

ations where the wellbeing of children was compromised due to concerns for their own safety.

Longhill NPO can be characterised as a grassroots organisation that values community participation. However, as Campbell (2003, p. 196 cited in Penn, 2005, p. 180) notes, “grassroots participation is by no means a “magic bullet”. As the discussion below outlines, engaging with and listening to local voices is integral to inform an early childhood project, such as the IAECD, however, this must be done alongside an acute awareness of “the power structures that shape what change is possible” (Penn, 2005, p. 180).

## Findings and Discussion

The two community workers featured in this study have worked collaboratively for Longhill NPO for thirty years. They have run a number of long-term early childhood projects in marginalised villages and towns in the Eastern Cape Province and have an intimate understanding of the challenges facing young children, their families and caregivers. Community members reported feelings of distrust of ‘development’ initiatives, which could be based on the range of government-led and non-profit sector-led development projects and programmes that have targeted many of the same areas in which they work. For example, one community member expressed that this was as if people had simply come to “view them in their poverty”. Add to this the long history of aid and development associated with the notion of rescue (Hayden & Wai, 2013). In other words, “the rescuers identified priorities and promoted those programs that they deemed to be in the best interest of the target populations and communities” (Hayden & Wai, 2013, p. 4). This approach stemmed from the belief that marginalised populations were “monolithic and needy in similar ways” and as such “similar tactics could be applied universally (Toomey, 2011)” (Hayden & Wai, 2013, p. 4). Given such experiences it is unsurprising that a feeling of community cynicism permeated the community workers first contact with project stakeholders. Here the concept of community was a useful starting point in the critical reflection process. Framing these communities as places of encounter, and not only as political and social entities, invoked the recognition of how community development projects might make explicit the ethical framework that underpins the work to be undertaken. Recognising work with marginalised communities as inevitably political praxis requires community workers to “position themselves in relationship to the world they are engaging with” (Urban, 2014, p. 246). A key part of this positioning is challenging what Urban (2014, p. 246) argues is the “epistemological hierarchy”. This refers to

“top-down structure of knowledge-production-and-application” in the field of early childhood and the need to replace this with “much more reciprocal and inclusive ways of understanding, orienting and theorising early childhood practices” (Urban, 2014, p. 246).

Two key aspects of the IAECD project emerged as central to its ability to mobilise fragmented communities around early childhood services and thus directly relates to the “power structures” that Penn (2005) claims shape potential for change. The first relates to a reconceptualising of the role of the funder in the IAECD project and the consequences this had for reconfiguring hegemonic power relations in community work. The second aspect relates to the establishment of an intersectoral / intercommunity early childhood forum – the Sinako ECD Forum - that emerged as a bottom-up initiative and mobilised a range of community, civil and state structures in an attempt to ensure locally relevant and sustainable early childhood services. The Forum, which began as a means to build capacity in providing an integrated approach to early childhood across the three communities, soon became a mechanism through which agency was reasserted and forms of solidarity established.

#### *Reconfiguring relations of power in the IAECD project*

Upon reflecting on configurations of power in the relationship between funders and Longhill NPO, one of the community workers reflects that:

Projects are often initiated within NPOs through the development of specific programme plans that have set targets and objectives and include the identification of the location in which the envisaged project is to be implemented. This tends to take place before the actual engagement with the community, in order to apply for, and secure, the funding necessary to sustain the project. In these communities we reversed the process – we first consulted with the communities, listened to their aspirations, what they needed and hoped for, for their children, and the challenges they faced. This was entirely supported by the funding body. (Community worker 1)

The approach described above remains a common feature in the contemporary practice of the early childhood non-profit sector as highlighted by Penn when she writes that most international non-government organisations (INGOs) “rely heavily on charitable donors and foundations, which in turn have their own agendas and priorities, which the INGO must to

a certain extent observe in order to maintain continuity of funding” (Penn, 2019, p. 10). In the IAECD project the funder acknowledged their acute lack of understanding about the community contexts, and thus challenged the hierarchical model of funder driven projects that risked undermining “local confidence, capacity and initiative” (Hayden & Wai, 2013, p. 5). This was integral to establishing a relationship of trust with Longhill NPO (and the community workers), as well as members of the three communities served by the IAECD project.

As the project developed the funder became increasingly interested in gaining a much deeper understanding of the three communities. The funder’s liaison community officer thus began to regularly meet with local community members through site visits without these meetings being arranged through Longhill NPO. In past projects, as the community worker notes below:

The NPO often serves as the ‘go-between’ in the relationship between the funder and the communities. This means that community workers on the project can decide which community members the funder (or their representative) talks to in order to gauge how the project is going. In the IAECD Project, the NPO did not mediate this relationship as the project developed. This resulted in increased transparency and the deepening of trust in the relationship. This is important because this results in a different kind of accountability – one that is not limited to evaluating the extent to which a project meets narrowly defined programmatic outcomes. (Community worker 2)

Opportunities for knowledge sharing among the funder and diverse community members strengthened dialogue and served to further challenge hierarchical relations of power in the project. Extracts from interviews with community members provide insight into their experiences on the IAECD project:

I had a vision for the young children in this place, but alone that vision was meaningless. This project has united us and together we are working for the well-being of children and to break the cycle of poverty. (Community member 1)

Not once have I been told that my thoughts and ideas don’t matter. The impact of this programme on me has been huge, not only as a Health Worker, but as a father and a member of a community...There is a new unity around children in the community. (Community member 2)

I have really learnt the importance of respecting all people in their spaces. The door to door visits, the social mapping and community gatherings was a remarkable process. People want to be heard and have a need to belong. (Community member 3)

A result of the funder's more nuanced understanding of the IAECD project resulted in flexibility in relation to project timeframes, budgetary requirements, and adherence to strict protocols. What emerged was a sense of solidarity that helped liberate the community workers from feeling "caught in a dilemma" between being responsive to community members and the demands of the project's donor agency (Hayden & Wai, 2013, p. 13).

*The establishment of an Early Childhood Development (ECD) Forum: A story of 'being able'*

The establishment of an ECD Forum to represent the interests across the three communities involved in the IAECD project emerged as a self-mobilised initiative among a range of community members. The ECD Forum chose the name 'Sinako', which translated into English means 'being able', to signify their desire to address the complex early childhood needs in an integrated manner. The Forum consists of representatives from local government departments (e.g. Departments of Social Development, Education, Health, Agriculture, Tourism, Home Affairs), the local municipality and ward committee, the Community Works Programme, as well as local community-based organisations and even the local taxi association. The Forum have monthly official meetings hosted across the thirteen early childhood education centres that are currently established. As a result of expressed community needs the Forum has, amongst other things, co-ordinated a financial management training workshop, undertaken recruitment and communications for early childhood training programmes, and established an active and responsive Whatsapp group. The Forum is made up of six elected members (Executive Committee) from across the three communities. New elections are run every two years with an individual serving a maximum of two terms. Anyone willing to be part of the Forum is invited to join.

This consolidated partnership not only expanded networks of support for young children, their families and the wider communities, it also re-configured relations of power within the broader IAECD project. Hayden and Wai (2013, p. 11) write that a potential weakness of community-based approaches to early childhood (such as characterised by the IAECD project) is that "participation of locals in development and decision making

could be tokenistic, could unwittingly enhance exclusion of some groups, could undermine local systems and/or reinforce neglect by the state, and could reduce the efficacy of communities that become reliant on external resource allocation". While it may be impossible to mitigate every potential weakness in a community-based project, the establishment of the ECD Forum early on in the IAECD lifespan played a critical part in helping to address some of these concerns. For example, during one round of door-to-door visits undertaken by community programme participants two children with serious health needs were identified. This was communicated to the ECD Forum and that same day two Executive Committee members volunteered to accompany the community members who had earlier in the day visited the households where the children lived. In less than twenty four hours both children had been referred to the relevant medical care. The Forum kept abreast of these developments and both children have recovered.

The ECD Forum is expressly intersectoral in nature as it aims to ensure that the state takes an active role in addressing early childhood related issues across the three communities. This is done by holding local government officials to account when necessary, and drawing on government support mechanisms already in place but perhaps underutilised. For example, where it has been identified that eligible caregivers are not receiving the child support grant, the ECD Forum has immediately contacted the Department of Social Development local representative to ensure the application for necessary documents is swiftly attended to. Through the Forum these communities have, among a range of other examples, successfully accessed a school feeding initiative, ensured children are enrolled at local primary schools, and been connected to a range of support services at both local and provincial government level.

The aim here is not to suggest that the ECD Forum serves as a panacea to early childhood challenges in these communities. We highlight how networks and structures can challenge conventional forms of top-down project management that inevitably limit the decision-making power of the community (Hayden & Wai, 2013). This is supported by a statement from one of the community workers:

It has certainly not always been easy, or comfortable, for some individuals working for the NPO to accept what they call 'the power of the ECD Forum' in decision-making processes and the like. But I feel it has been an extremely exciting aspect of this particular project. I be-

lieve that the Forum is genuinely working in the best interests of not only the young children in the communities, but for the communities as a whole. (Community worker 2)

## Way Forward

In this article an attempt has been made to provide glimpses into how meaningful dialogue might be mediated in marginalised and often fragmented communities. Key themes that emerge as integral to the IAECD project are those of reconfiguring relations of power, taking into account that this is not necessarily an easy or comfortable experience. Establishing relations of trust and solidarity among project stakeholders takes time and commitment, as well as the desire to understand ways of knowing and doing childhood in locally specific and detailed ways. What follows includes a few key considerations when allies and communities commit to establishing grassroots orientated initiatives.

- The nature of the entry into the community influences the foundation for any grassroots oriented initiative. By observing and listening carefully, it is possible to connect with the community context, felt needs and vision for early childhood services, as well as mobilizing maximum participation. This can take time and rushing can be counter-productive. The community workers reported that they spent approximately 3 months in the IAECD project getting to know the people and the environment and seeing the needs for themselves. They explain that while it might seem expensive – this investment of time saves making avoidable mistakes.
- Each community is different and has its own unique dynamics. Connecting with the specific local context increases community confidence and ownership in the process. It also builds community cohesion and social capital as the evidence of what is being achieved becomes visible within the community.
- Participatory engagement connects top-down and bottom-up processes. Inter-sectoral collaboration is key to implementing participatory integrated early childhood approaches. By engaging government officials and programmes with local community contexts and needs, it is possible to operationalise a range of different outreach programmes. Close attention to the ECD national government priorities to target systemic barriers can build community-based organisations and capacity to deliver services at the grassroots level.

- While it might be necessary to import material resources to implement respective programmes, it is possible to draw on the capacity of community members to make decisions about the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of these programmes. In this way the work can be transformational as capacity and confidence can be transferred beyond the specific services being provided.

The final word is left to one of the community workers:

Here, at this time and in this place, all our past experiences of working with communities have finally converged, for us, to make true the African proverb that says, 'If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together'. We have walked together. (Community worker 1)

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