



When community works

Early learning playgroups in the North West

Cynthia Molehe's grandfather always told her she would grow up to be a teacher. "He used to say that I got the brains in the family and that I was going to make something of my life," she says. "But when I finished my matric in 2004, there just wasn't any money to send me to college."

Cynthia grew up in Madibogo, a small village in North West's most rural and under-developed local municipality - Ratlou. Ratlou stretches for kilometres - it's vast and dry, with no towns, no industry and minimal tourism. More than 100 000 people live here and the only job opportunities open to them are seasonal farming work or contract work at the nearby open-pit gold mine, operated by Harmony Gold, which averages a variable work head count of just 450.

When the door to tertiary education closed in Cynthia's face, she travelled to nearby Mahikeng and Vryberg to look for work. All she found were piece jobs: a few hours at a time helping in a shop or a month's contract at a petrol station. In 2013, she joined the Department of Cooperative Governance's Community Work Programme (CWP). At that stage,

the CWP had already been running for a year in Ratlou - its core function was to provide meaningful work opportunities to the poor.

"The work is all community orientated - maintaining vegetable gardens in schools, assisting the aged, cleaning public spaces, that sort of work" says Cynthia. "Soon after I entered the CWP, I was identified as a skilled worker and I received different kinds of training. But, I hadn't given up on my dream to become a teacher."

"In 2015, I was invited to train as an early learning playgroup facilitator (ELF) and I jumped at the chance to work with children. Later that year, I was promoted to a mentor trainer - a manager of a group of ELFs. This is what I do now - I manage 10 playgroups in Ratlou, I advise the ELFs and make sure they are doing the work. Next, I am going to further my studies - maybe through UNISA. I am going to be a teacher."

The early learning playgroup model was introduced in the North West early in 2015 through a partnership between the CWP, the North West Department of Social Development, Cotlands, LIMA Rural Development Foundation and Ilifa

Labantwana.

"This project has been a model public-private partnership with a clear and transparent framework that government and NGO partners enter into to share resources," says Zamani Cele, LIMA's learning support facilitator for the North West. "Each partner has their own roles and responsibilities for the programme success and for the public good."

"These partnerships shift the work undertaken by CWP participants from menial work to social action and have the potential to create viable career paths for the participants so that they can 'graduate out of poverty' - what CWP refers to as an 'exit strategy'," adds Zamani.

Ilifa Labantwana supports LIMA and Cotlands, two national NGOs, who partner with provincial CWP implementing agents to select appropriately qualified CWP participants to run playgroups for children aged 3 to 5, who do not have access to any early learning stimulation. The implementing agents in the North West are Seriti Institute and Dhladhla Foundation.

The CWP participants are selected based on their willingness to work with



children and build off personal ambitions to pursue a teaching career.

“We are very thorough in our selection. Participants are literate, have passed Grade 10, we check for criminal records, and we do aptitude, numeracy and literacy assessments,” says Zamani. Participants are also screened against the sexual offenders register, in line with legislation in the Children’s Act.

Once the CWP participants are selected they receive training on playgroup facilitation through Cotlands, a non-profit early childhood development organisation. Aside from providing the initial training

to the ELF’s, Cotlands and Lima provide ongoing support to people like Cynthia – the mentor trainers.

“The early learning programme – CWP4ECD – is different to the rest of the CWP work,” says Terrance Mahlatsi, who manages the 1200 CWP participants in Ratlou. “The participants who have trained as ELF’s want to teach in the future. This work opportunity means that think of themselves as teachers already, their dreams grow.”

The benefits of the early learning programme have not been limited to the CWP participants alone. Terrance explains that many villages in Ratlou have no ECD centres and therefore no stimulation opportunities for the children who live there. Where day care centres exist, the cost – anything from R50 to R350 per month – is too much for many rural households, who rely primarily on social grants and subsistence farming for survival.

The South African Early Childhood Review, published in 2016 by Ilifa Labantwana, The Children’s Institute, and the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation found that 71% of North West’s children under 6 live in poor households.

As a result, the majority of children under five spend most of the day at home. According to the South African Early Childhood Review, one third of South Africa’s 3 to 5 year olds – that is 1 million children – don’t attend any early learning programme.

“Young children need to be stimulated.

Mmapule Mothobi, an Early Learning Playgroup facilitator, with two of the children in her Ratlou playgroup.

The learning which takes place before school will ensure that the child is able to absorb knowledge once they start Grade R,” says Getrude Mabeza, Cotlands Project Manager for the North West. “There is evidence that children who attend a good quality early learning programme are better equipped for the formal education system.”

“I have seen the difference these playgroups make in so many children,” says Cynthia. “They come shy and they sit in the corner, not talking and not interested in the games. One little boy – Thabo – didn’t even know how to play with the toys! A few weeks in and they are excited, they are taking part in everything, they can’t stop talking. I don’t mind if they are naughty – that’s how children should be.”

“Their parents come and thank us. They say ‘you have made my child clever’.”

Mmapule Mothobi is one of the CWP participants running a playgroup, managed by Cynthia. Mmapule’s playgroup, which is attended by 10 children, is housed in a small outlying building on a private property. Like most playgroups, it relies on space donated by the community – such as churches, spare rooms, primary schools – procured through the initiative of the CWP

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**GETRUDE MABEZA,
COTLANDS PROJECT
MANAGER FOR THE
NORTH WEST**

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Early Learning Playgroups in the North West

103

CWP Participants facilitating playgroups

99

Total number of playgroups

1070

Total number of children attending playgroups

participant themselves.

Children arrive for the 9am start time. Their morning is structured. Mmapule, working together with a second facilitator, takes the children through a series of activities, designed to stimulate, inspire curiosity and engage the imagination. Mmapule has been trained in facilitating each activity but has the flexibility to improve and adapt as she goes along. Her sounding board is Cynthia, her mentor trainer, who visits her playgroup on a regular basis, providing support, filling knowledge gaps and assisting with administration.

Mmapule was working in the community food garden when she first joined the CWP. "The work at the playgroups is much better. I have received interesting training and I am learning at work every day. My dream is to have my own ECD one day, this is helping me aet

there," she says.

Shortly before noon, Mmapule serves the children a snack, marking the end of her day with the children and the start of a trickle of parents arriving to pick up their children. Jobeta Warona is picking up three-year-old Ameelia. "The most important thing is the activities she does now because once she starts school she won't fall behind the other children. All that I dream for is a bright future for her."

The impact of the playgroups on the development of the local children has been noticed by the local schools, who have welcomed their contribution to the education eco-system. Winnie Letsapa, an ELF who runs a playgroup from her mother's spare room in Ratlou's Setlagole village, says that the local primary school is assisting her with materials and advice.

"They help me because the work I am doing with the children now will help them once they start school," she says. "The principal came to see the playgroup and she told me she really liked it. When I needed a chalkboard, she gave me a spare one from the school."

In Ratlou, the CWP programme is led at a municipal level by Mamokete

Winnie Letsapa with the playgroup she hosts in her mother's spare room in Setlagole Village.



Molebelwe, who has championed the programme since its inception.

“The main thing about the CWP is that it restores dignity to people’s lives. The participants were people who had no way of providing for their families. Some of them had no bank accounts or ID books. They have those things now and it’s a source of pride.”

“The CWP early learning programme is different to the other kinds of CWP work. The people who do the work really enjoy it and they become ambitious, they want to progress.”

The CWP4ECD programme is transforming and this will mean that those CWP4ECD participants who want to move forward in the field, will be given the opportunity. The introduction of SmartStart social franchising in 2016 means that the ELF’s, now to be called SmartStarters, will register playgroups under their own names, go through a licencing and accreditation process to help them deliver a quality early learning programme and become part of a much wider network of support, through their local club. They also have the possibility to earn income by charging parents a small monetary contribution towards the running of the playgroup depending on what the parents can afford. The mentor trainers, now Club Coaches, will continue to provide support, ensuring that the quality of the early learning taking place is maintained.

“This is very exciting for the ELF’s,” says Mosetsanagape Blennies, Club Coach for the Kagisano Molopo local municipality, who manages 11 playgroups and 25 ELF’s. “They never thought that they would accomplish this sort of work and make a difference in their community.”

Mosetsanagape adds that parents in her municipality are seeing increasing value in the playgroups, which in turn has increased respect for the ELF’s and improved their self-esteem. This is, in



Veronika Mokhutsane and fellow CWP participant Boitumelo Leipego in front of the structure they use to host playgroups in Kagisano Molopo’s Ganyesa Village.

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part, as a result of the monthly parent workshops run by the ELF’s, focusing on at-home parenting skills such as positive discipline and storytelling.

“The ELF’s don’t just run the playgroups, they are helping caregivers provide better care for their children during the rest of the time as well,” she says. “If parents don’t come to the parenting workshops, the ELF’s visit them at home. This means they can identify problem situations at home and they can assist.”

One of the ELF’s under the support of Mosetsanagape, Veronica Mokhutsane, recently discovered that a child attending her playgroup was coming in hungry in the morning. After visiting the child’s home, Veronica rallied the support of the community for the destitute household.

“This job has changed me,” says Veronica. “I never thought I would be someone in life. I didn’t think I would be a teacher. I didn’t think I could do something to help my community.”

This publication was produced by Ilifa Labantwana. The CWP4ECD programme is a joint initiative between the following organisations:



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