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LEARNING BRIEF
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GROUP LEARNING PROGRAMMES: EVIDENCE FROM THE SOBAMBISANA INITIATIVE





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Ilifa Labantwana is a national Early Childhood Development Programme in South Africa. Ilifa Labantwana is concerned with the design and testing of scalable integrated and affordable ECD models which can be taken forward to ensure that all children in South Africa have access to the services they need to develop to their full potential. It is within this context that Ilifa funded five organisations to test what they believed would be workable models in the context in which they were working. What emerged was a community of practice known as the Sobambisana (Help each other) Initiative.

The Sobambisana Initiative was carried out over a four year period and tracked by a robust research process focusing on monitoring and evaluation the models being implemented. Based on this research, a series of five learning briefs has been published, this is the fourth in the series. It focuses specifically on what emerged from the research about Group Learning Programmes.

Evidence for the effectiveness of preschool and other group learning programmes

Evidence across high, middle and low-income countries points to the role that a good quality preschool programme can play in enhancing child development in the years prior to school and in assisting in the transition to formal schooling. To achieve these goals, the focus needs to be wide, including health and nutritional inputs as well as improving language, cognition and readiness for learning.

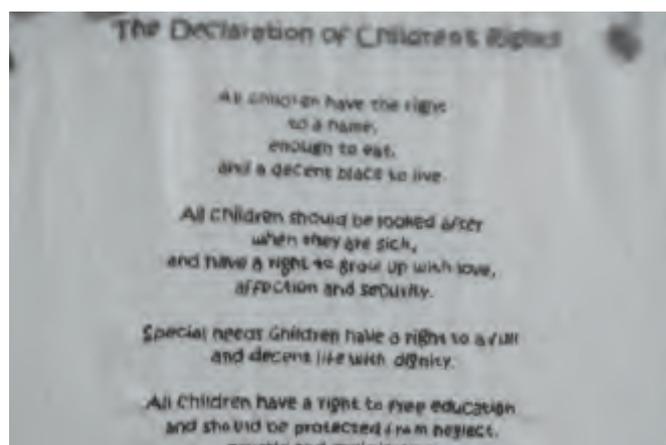
In studies conducted in high-income countries, the benefits of high quality preschool programmes for children from disadvantaged communities are evident throughout the school years and last into adulthood.

Quality preschool programmes

Quality depends on factors such as a clean, safe environment with a range of activities and opportunities to stimulate different areas of development, a variety of learning materials and sufficiently low numbers of children per adult. Other important factors include trained practitioners who understand how young children develop and learn; and sensitive, warm and responsive practitioners with good communication and listening skills. Key dimensions associated with better learning outcomes include:

- **Active, individual support and attention from the staff** builds the child's development of skills relevant to school;
- **More free-choice activities than regulated activities** controlled by the teacher or in a large group; and
- **Access to a wide variety of materials.**

Research in South Africa and other countries indicates that quality programmes depend on support and supervision of practitioners post training and on sound management.





The situation in South Africa

According to the 2010 General Household Survey released by Statistics South Africa, about 30 percent of South African children under the age of five have access to a group ECD experience, including preschools, crèches and playgroups. Not all can be assumed to provide quality educational stimulation. Traditionally, most of the children who are in group programmes attend full-day centres with a focus on childcare rather than education. Two recent South African studies have indicated that in general, insufficient attention is given to the development of children through appropriate programmes at community ECD sites.

Recent legislation and policy includes provisions for improving ECD service quality. The Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005) requires that group ECD programmes register both as a partial-care facility (Section 76) and as an ECD programme (Section 94). The latter has a focus on educational content.

In 2009, the National Department of Basic Education developed National Early Learning Development Standards to provide guidelines for developmentally appropriate standards and suggested activities to facilitate their achievement. Currently, a curriculum is being developed for pre-Grade R children based on the standards.

The Sobambisana group learning programmes

Preschool centres

All five Sobambisana partners were involved in centre-

based training and enrichment to improve the quality of community preschool or public Grade R programmes. Together, these reached 138 practitioners.

TREE and Khululeka offered NQF level 4 training. This involved theory and practical sessions, making use of equipment and on-site support and assessment.

The Early Learning Resources Unit's (ELRU's) school enrichment intervention involved capacity building workshops for teachers in Foundation Phase classes and community preschools to improve the quality of these services.

The Ntataise Enrichment Programme (NEP) aimed to assist practitioners who had received formal training (preferably NQF Level 4) to implement a quality learning programme for three to five-year-olds in their classes, with a focus on preparation for school. Suitable learning materials were provided, there were monthly theme workshops and on-site modelling of good practice was conducted twice per term.

For the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD), Sobambisana evaluated a programme of 15 skills workshops, with on-site support focused on improving the teaching and learning environment for practitioners with no previous ECD training, though some had other teaching qualifications.



Playgroups

A playgroup tends to be less formal than a preschool programme, offered on a less frequent basis and is usually facilitated by paraprofessional practitioners who are often the parents of participating children.

A Cambodian study found that children benefited from home-based groups run by mothers who had very little training and limited equipment. The study authors suggest that because mothers were involved in the programme, it changed the way they interacted with their children at home, thereby increasing their children's exposure to early education. In addition, these groups raised awareness in the community of school preparedness as a collective responsibility.

Two Sobambisana partners (Ntataise and TREE) focused on playgroups, while Khululeka offered an informal playgroup as an adjunct to its parent-education programme, which is discussed in Learning Brief 6 (group programmes for parenting education).

The key differences between the Ntataise (Mosupatsela) and TREE playgroup programmes are outlined below.

TREE structured playgroup programme

This programme provided developmentally appropriate experiences with accompanying resources and targeted

young children aged three to five years who did not have access to preschools. Play facilitators were responsible for four playgroups each and facilitated a session once per week. The programme was delivered on an ongoing basis with no limit to the number of sessions the child could attend. Volunteer parents hosted the groups and offered them on days when the play facilitator was not present. Refresher training on the programme was provided to play facilitators once per month.

Ntataise (Mosupatsela) playgroup programme.

A weekly, two-hour playgroup programme was offered to parents and children aged three to five in different outdoor locations. An average of 23 sessions was offered in a year. The target was children who were not able to attend preschools, mostly because their parents could not afford the fees. Mosupatsela offered strong school-readiness activities once a week by a formally trained ECD facilitator. Parent participation in the Mosupatsela groups was a key element of their programme theory. Parents were expected to attend with children so that they could learn to support the learning of both the playgroup and other children in their homes. However, parent attendance was poor and inconsistent, making it unlikely that this goal would be achieved.





Evaluation questions

- Did site-enrichment interventions (practitioner training) improve the quality of early care and learning environments?
- Did the interventions reach their intended targets?
- Did the interventions increase ECD opportunities for vulnerable children?
- Did the interventions improve cognitive and language abilities and improve access to services?
- Do children in Grade R who have experienced Sobambisana interventions perform better in assessments of cognitive, language, numeracy and readiness to learn than those who have not received an ECD programme prior to Grade R?

Programme outcomes

ECD sites:

- Preschool practitioner training of different kinds improved quality at ECD sites and in classrooms, sometimes substantially, measured on subscales of the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale.

Playgroups:

1. Reach:

- Mosupatsela had a limited reach of 116 children in 2009 and 2010 and low parent participation rates (33%). Children who attended 15 or more sessions of Mosupatsela showed significant improvement in cognition compared with children who attended fewer sessions.
- In the case of TREE, 10 play facilitators reached 1175 children, providing an ECD experience for a large number of children who would not otherwise have had one. These playgroups were used as referral points for obtaining relevant documents, clinic cards and social grants, some of which were successfully resolved, though data is limited.

2. Child outcomes:

- These were assessed only in the case of the Mosupatsela playgroup. As it had not been possible to create a separate control group, children were divided into two groups following the intervention, those who had attended less or more than 50% of the sessions. The former acted as a comparison group;



- The children who had attended more than 50% of the sessions showed a far greater improvement in cognitive development than those who had attended less.

Programme impact

The impact of training and enrichment on cognitive, numeracy, language and readiness to learn was tested in Grade R.

- Children who had attended classrooms in which teachers were trained by partners achieved better scores on all outcome measures than children who had not been exposed to an ECD programme, or who had been exposed to a home visiting or playgroup programme;
- Playgroup children had no better scores regarding cognitive, language, numeracy and readiness to learn than those who had not had ECD, when compared with children who had been enrolled in preschools. However, for Mosupatsela, results regarding readiness to learn and cognition indicated that the programme had the potential to promote readiness for school.

Table 1: Sobambisana interventions conducted by each NPO

Developmental capability	Which children did better in Grade R?		
	No ECD	Playgroups	ECD sites with practitioner training
Cognition			✓
Language			✓
Numeracy (counting)			✓
Numeracy (number concept)			✓
Academic readiness			✓

Lessons learned

Teacher training at ECD sites and public schools

- Implementation is strengthened when the management committee, principal or head of department supports the practitioner;
- Practical on-site support, where appropriate teaching practice is modelled and practitioners are assisted with particular capacity building needs, together with the provision of appropriate equipment (improvised or bought), is key to success in improving programme quality;
- Short, practical courses focused on activities and a planned programme can effect improvements in the quality of classroom ECD in quite a short time;
- Maintaining participation in learnerships and skills programmes which do not have the incentive of a stipend or qualification is challenging in certain contexts;

- Personal support by means of a trainer and group training experience is motivating for practitioners and can encourage them to improve their classes and consider further professional development.

Overall, evidence from the training programmes in the Sobambisana Initiative supports international experience, in that the involvement of management, training and equipment enhances practitioners' ability to offer a quality programme, including a range of activities, improved interaction and language and reasoning mediation.





Playgroup programmes

To improve child-development outcomes:

- Regular and frequent attendance in high quality, long-term interventions aligned to the capabilities required for school is needed;
- A highly structured programme provided by well-trained staff and with suitable equipment can have positive effects with relatively light exposure.

Playgroup implementation lessons

- Attendance of children in both models was, on average, much lower than the level expected to make a difference. Efforts need to be made to secure more regular child attendance to ensure a greater exposure to inputs, as low exposure may be insufficient to change cognitive and language outcomes;
- Parent participation, as planned in the Mosupatsela programme, was not very successful due to low attendance. It may not be a critical element in enhancing the benefits of the playgroup for the child;
- The sustainability of playgroups using volunteer parents and for which the venues are homes in the community is likely to be challenging in the longer term;
- In the playgroups run by volunteer caregivers with weekly support from playgroup facilitators, many younger children were enrolled. This may have been because they accompanied the volunteers, or because feeding was an incentive in these groups. As a result of this, the playgroup programme did not include a strong focus on school-readiness activities.
- One of the partners initially implemented a cascade model, whereby play facilitators were chosen by the community and trained and supported. They in turn trained parents to take turns to run these groups.
- While this approach can reach large numbers of children, it struggles to maintain quality. Where cascade models are used, it is essential that high levels of supervision are maintained.

Overall, the outcomes for the playgroup interventions largely support the international evidence that group experiences are effective in developing the cognitive and learning readiness requirements for school.

The Sobambisana Evaluation was conducted by Andy Dawes of the University of Cape Town Department of Psychology together with Linda Biersteker and Lynn Hendricks of the Early Learning Resource Unit.

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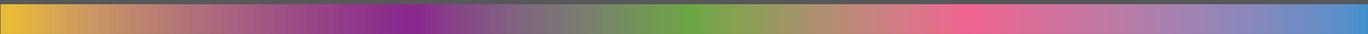
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Ilifa Labantwana is a multi-donor partnership which supports integrated early childhood development (ECD) in South Africa. The donor partners include the ELMA Foundation, the UBS Optimus Foundation and the DG Murray Trust. Ilifa Labantwana aims to increase access to, and improve the quality of integrated early childhood development services for children in under-served communities; and to support South African policy implementation of integrated ECD interventions in a sustainable manner.



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