Creating Hubs of Inclusive Early Education in KwaZulu Natal

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Prevailing parental and community attitudes often lead to the exclusion of children with disability from early learning opportunities. This exclusion is exacerbated by a lack of relevant professional practitioner development. ECD practitioners lack knowledge of how to identify and address barriers to learning in their day-to-day practice.

In the South African context, the issue of inclusivity,[1] particularly in early childhood settings, is gaining momentum. Along with the government's policy of Grade R universalisation by 2014, the Department of Social Development (DSD) has also prioritised the scaling up of ECD services for younger children (aged zero to four years). In line with the Children's Amendment Act (No. 41 of 2007), expansion of ECD must be aimed at children from poor communities, including children with disabilities.

This prioritisation of ECD, as well as the recognition of its potential for early identification and intervention for children with developmental delays, provides a unique opportunity for early intervention and social integration for children with disabilities. Not only do ECD facilities need to be accessible, but programmes need to be appropriate and inclusive of children with disabilities.

Towards inclusion in ECD

Following the signing of its Memorandum of Understanding with the KwaZulu Natal provincial government in March 2013, Ilifa Labantwana set out to develop systemic support for inclu-

Figure 1: Elements of an Inclusive ECD Centre

INCLUSIVE CULTURES	INCLUSIVE POLICIES	INCLUSIVE PRACTICES
Building Communities	Developing a centre for all: teachers, children, parents	Organising play and learning for all
Establishing Inclusive Values	Organising support for diversity	Mobilising resources

Source: Adapted by Inclusive Education Western Cape from Booth, T, and Ainscow, M. "Index for Inclusion" (ECD version) Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education. 2004

sive early education. Working closely with DSD, criteria were established, centres were shortlisted and selected, from each of the local municipalities in the Ugu district, which could be supported as inclusive hubs.

The partnership included four non-governmental organisations: TREE, the Disability Action Research Team (DART), Inclusive Education South Africa (IESA) and Siyakwazi. Together, they aimed to create inclusive ECD hubs in each of the local municipalities of the district, working through existing ECD centres. These hubs have been designed to act as centres of good practice and provide support to other ECD practitioners,

parents and caregivers of children identified as having barriers to learning and to the surrounding community. The sustainability of this project is anchored in its ability to ignite a systemic impact through which the provincial government commits to provide continuous support and funding for these inclusive hubs.

Ilifa and its partners have been facilitating a process of collaboration between role-players with the aim of ensuring that they provide an enabling environment within which young children with disabilities can be given the best first steps in their early years. This has involved four focus areas:

1) Through identification, training and mentoring support for the inclusive ECD hubs, the Ilifa partners have been able to stimulate an innovative and inter-sectoral approach towards closing the equity gaps that young children with disabilities experience. A training programme for ECD practitioners from the inclusive hubs has been developed and is being implemented by IESA, through a series of five two day workshops and follow-up support being provided through mentors from the DART, TREE and Siyakwazi.

2) Parents of children with disabilities are also being supported through a series of three-day workshops being held in each of the six local municipalities in Ugu. Underpinned by the rights of children with disabilities, these workshops provide information on ECD and highlight the critical role that parents and other caregivers play in the development of their children. During the course of the programme, parents develop advocacy messages relating to their children and elect representatives to sit on their local Disability Forum.

3) Particular attention is being given to developing awareness among staff of the Department of Social Development, including ECD coordinators and social workers, of the importance of access to early learning for children with disabilities. In addition, there has been a focus on Disability Forums at district and local municipality level towards addressing issues related to young children with disabilities, by promoting representation of parents in these structures.

4) A *Resource Directory of Services to Support Inclusion in ECD* is being developed to aid referrals and promote collaboration between role-players and service providers in government and civil society. This is providing an important opportunity, not only to disseminate information about available resources but also to identify gaps and to increase collaboration.

Promoting enhanced collaboration

While the role of the ECD practitioner is crucially important in promoting inclusive ECD hubs, there are many different stakeholders and sectors that can contribute to effective quality early education for children with disabilities and other barriers to learning. The provincial Departments of Health (DOH) and Education (DOE) both have roles in the provision of assistive devices, developmental screening of children and assessment of barriers to learning and development. Disability-specific NGOs can provide specialist skills and expertise within the education/training sector. Further, parents have a unique role to play in supporting their children. To this end, one of the priorities for the inclusive early education project is the formation of critical networks of support for each inclusive ECD hub, in an effort to surround the practitioner with ample resources when support is required. Sometimes all a practitioner requires is an ability to refer a child or family to a point where she knows that expert help will be provided.

Prioritisation of ECD... provides a unique opportunity for early intervention and social integration for children with disabilities.

A systemic response to challenges in inclusion

Ilifa and its partners have identified the following elements necessary to facilitate a systemic response to the inclusion challenges in the ECD ecosystem:

1. Inter-sectoral Collaboration

Inclusion in ECD requires each sector to embrace and extend its particular role with respect to young children with disabilities. For example, the health sector offers tremendous potential for early identification and intervention for young children with developmental delays and disabilities, even during routine clinic visits (e.g. for immunisations). This requires not only effective use of developmental screening tools on the part of primary health care nurses and effective referrals to the relevant services; it also calls for recognition of the importance of rehabilitation services within primary health care. Similarly, the DOE needs to create awareness within its structures of the actions being taken to prepare children with disabilities for entry into schooling, as well of the mechanisms in place to ensure that such transitions are as smooth as possible.

2. Child Tracking

It is critical that mechanisms for tracking disabled children are developed across various sectors and these sectors need to continue clarifying and developing their roles in this regard.

3. Widespread Benefits of Inclusion

Inclusion embodies good practice in ECD: promoting partici-pation of active learning for all children at an appropriate level. This needs to be underpinned by a strong organisational base and good governance systems, as well as methods for communication and collaboration. Efforts to support inclusive learning in ECD will support effective learning for all children.

4. A Common Vision

Collaboration between stakeholders is essential for effective inclusion of all children in early learning services. This requires that red tape and other barriers to partnerships are addressed, that resources are allocated for regular communication and that emphasis is placed on developing and sustaining a common purpose and vision between stakeholders. Collaborations will not be effective without accountability and feedback.

The Ilifa project partners will continue to work together to develop competent hubs and systems which propel these guidelines and entrench the project within the KwaZulu Natal provincial systems – harnessing all possible opportunities and resources to ensure access to quality early learning services for all vulnerable children.

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Endnotes

1 Inclusive education is defined as a process of addressing the diverse needs of all learners by reducing barriers to and within the learning environment.