

Reaching Out

A Development Centred Approach to Educare

Community Development Trust

The Chatsworth Early Learning Centre, run by the Community Education Development Trust, was launched in 1980 on the initiative of community workers there. Operating from a small community building, the project concentrated its activities in promoting the development of early childhood activities in Chatsworth's Unit 5. Over the years, the programme came to embrace all 14 units of the township which is about 20km south of Durban.

The Centre's Area of Action

With growing expertise, the Centre faced an increasing demand to provide services to adjoining townships around Durban including Phoenix, Tongaat, Merebank, etc. The Centre's work has grown to such an extent that its services are available to several townships and adjoining informal settlements. Project staff are involved in all major disadvantaged communities in the southern Natal region. The Centre's geographical spread includes the Valley of a Thousand Hills (near Pietermaritzburg), Phoenix and Tongaat on Durban's north coast, Pinetown and its satellite township, Claremont. Informal settlements serviced by the Centre are within the Durban functional region. This includes settlements around Marianhill, in which there are three informal settlements, 'Uganda' settlement (near Isipingo), and settlements around the townships of Chatsworth, Lamontville and Umlazi. The Centre's services are spread as far south as Port Shepstone and its environs. Contacts in KwaZulu, as far afield as Nongoma, have resulted in the Centre providing training services to the KwaZulu Child Care Centre Project there.

Despite the project extending geographically, it has maintained its organisational base at Chatsworth, providing early childhood education services in the various schools within the area. Initially serving about 154 children, the project now works directly with 2763 children and indirectly reaches out to a further 3500.

National Input

The project has gained in knowledge, experience and expertise in the development of a unique community based model for the provision of pre-school services in residential urban settings and informal settlements. The project is involved in refining and sharpening presentation on its approach, and making this information available for national discussion.

The project's director, Mr Roy Padayachee, co-ordinates the ANC educare policy working group, and is national chair of the National Interim Working Committee (NIWC). NIWC is involved in establishing a democratic and representative mass based organisation for educare. NIWC has a large number of welfare affiliates, and has operational linkages with COSATU affiliates, NACTU, Women's Forum, National Education Crisis Committee, the National Children's Rights Commission, the Independent Development Trust and the South African Council of Churches. With the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) and the World Bank, Mr Padayachee is the team leader of a South African educare study formulating recommendations to be put to the newly elected interim government. The Centre's staff are involved in NIWC and the southern Natal Children's Rights Committee.

What's Unique About the Centre's Approach?

The Trust's experience suggests that western models of educare are inadequate for local conditions. Western models exclude traditional patterns of socialising children, thereby excluding the role of parents and extended families, who in an African context play a vital role in a child's development. Western models also require the setting up of centre-based approaches, which as an initial step involve the building and running of costly formal school. We need to pursue an approach which involves building on parental self confidence and developing community skills of self reliance.

From the experience of establishing a purely educare programme in Chatsworth, it has been learnt that child care cannot be adequately addressed without trying to engage in improving the quality of life of parents and communities as a whole. It was found that if our work with children was to be successful, we would need to work with the community too.

Thus, the Trust has two aspects. The Community Education and Development Institute which focuses on improving the environment in which children and their families live, and the Centre, which engages in educare. The Institute's role is to assist communities in lobbying for facilities such as proper water and

sanitation provision. It helps people secure land and facilitates community contact with self help organisations. Forums have been set up involving community members in discussion around their various problems. The Institute has assisted in developing civic structures.

The Institute liaises closely with the Centre. For example, when the Centre receives requests for its educare services from parents in informal settlements, it may find that lack of water or sanitary services are a hindrance to its work. It then consults the Institute to find ways of securing these facilities. The Institute, for its part, when it enters a settlement, does a survey of the community's needs. Where educare facilities are lacking, it consults the Centre.

In communities such as informal settlements, where there is a total lack of educare services, we have learnt that, in the interim, non-government organisations can try alternatives to more costly, formal schools. The centre has reached out to children in communities far beyond its original base in Chatsworth, through its play bus, play group and child minding programmes. The play bus approach involves converting buses into mobile classrooms, which provide classes once a week at each area visited. These visits involve two hour sessions. The constraint on having longer sessions is the fact that the play bus programme is an attempt to cover a large number of children over a wide area. As a backup to this service, the Centre tries to involve parents in workshops and encourages them to continue activities of the play bus after hours.

Play groups operate from people's garages and backrooms. A trained home visitor, usually a parent, goes to these homes and meets with groups of children. Where it is feasible, parents are encouraged to attend. In the end, however, we find as parents' expectations change they begin to prefer more stable educare structures.

Aspects of Educare Work: Training

The Centre has grown from initial contact with children and parents into the establishment of home-based mother and child play groups and the provision of a toy-lending library. The Centre regularly offers various training programmes, such as:

- * a pre-school orientation programme which is an introductory and orientation course aimed at new entrants into the field of pre-school work;
- * a nursery aid orientation programme which is a higher level course aimed at resident teachers of nursery schools and creches;
- * a pre-school teachers' forum which, by way of workshops, serves teachers' term-by-term practical and theoretical development in the programmes of their specific schools; and

- * a parent training/home visitor's play group training course which is tailored to the needs of community home visitors who serve as play group organisers in the community.

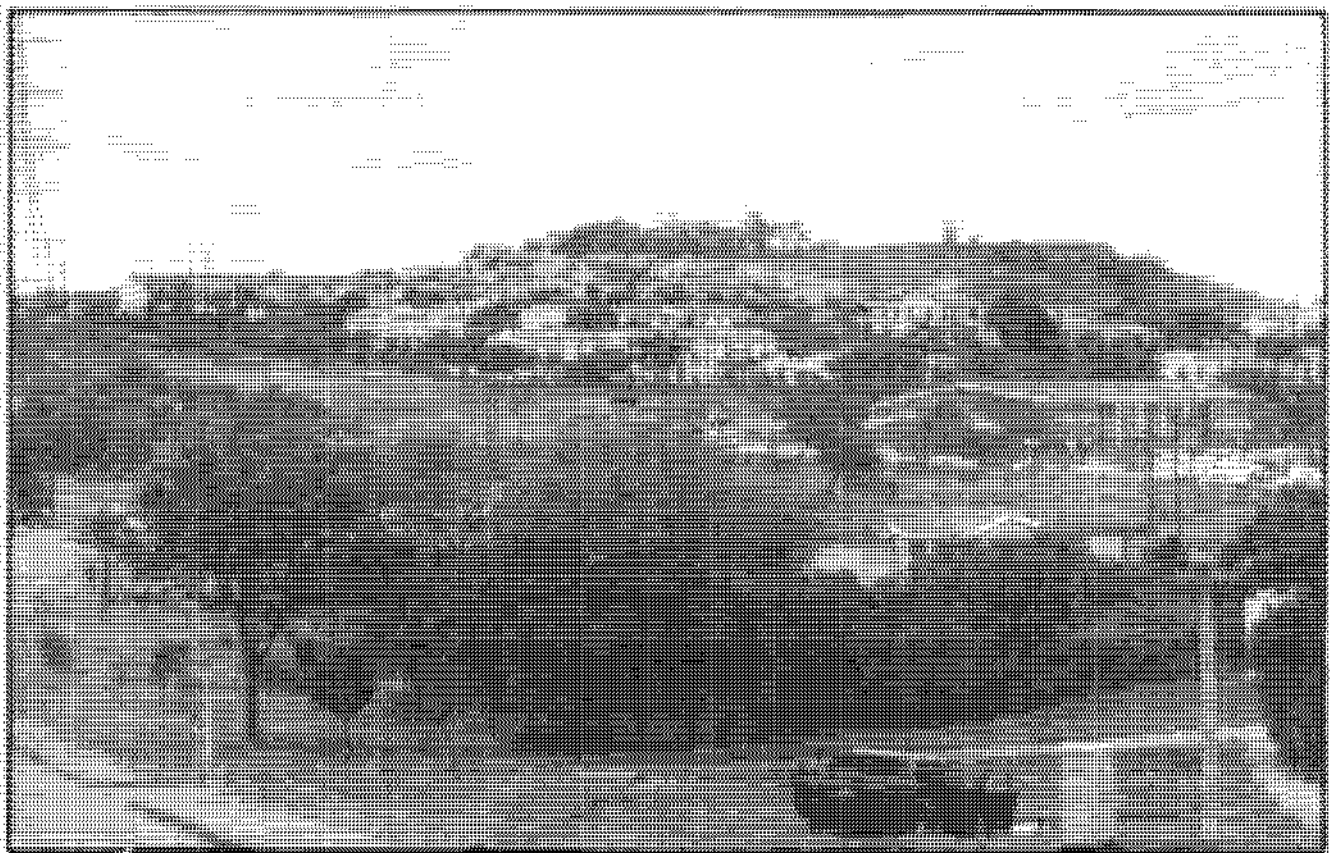
Parent Volunteer Programmes

Another programme, a parent volunteer programme is an introductory course aimed at community volunteers wishing to be involved in pre-school development work. The wide focus of the course enables community volunteers to grasp the essentials of early childhood educational work, while offering parents basic theory and practical skills so they can play a more informed role in their children's development at home. This course is held on request, and whenever a sufficient number of candidates are available.

An on-site training programme provides innovative training, tailored to the needs of organisations and agencies that have large functioning early education programmes. The training events are held on or near the hosting institution.

This programme aims at:

- * examining the needs of pre-school projects and their teaching personnel;
- * taking the programme to the location of trainees;



Phoenix lies next to the largest and fastest growing informal settlement in the country, Inanda. Photo: Ismail Vawda

- * examining the hosting institutions general aims and looking at how early childhood programmes could give meaningful support to these and the growth of the institution;
- * deriving an understanding of the hosting institution's organisational culture and the interactions of personnel to support the development of early childhood education initiatives within the organisation;
- * helping identify human resources for the hosting organisation; and
- * developing appropriate training initiative that could respond to these needs.

Concluding Remarks: The Need for Networking

The majority of South Africa's children grow up in an environment of poverty, deprivation and emotional stress. A system of educare provision could give these children a better start by giving them access to education, health and nutrition. It would provide for the needs of working parents. Unfortunately the educare field has been low on the priority of national negotiations. Disadvantaged communities by their own efforts have established localised organisations which have been struggling over the years to provide services to young children. As commendable as these efforts are, they have been unable to overcome the scale of services needed. They have been unable to fundamentally change the reality of deprivation that young children face.

By and large, these efforts have been fragmentary, unco-ordinated and minuscule in a sea of disadvantage. A competitive pursuit for limited resources has, in most cases, produced uneven levels of service provision. Some organisations attain high levels of proficiency while others lag behind. The Community Education Development Trust has developed a pilot networking programme in the areas of its operation. This networking programme aims to create a co-operative system of educare. Given the conditions generated by competition for scarce resources and the inability of parents to afford the costs of educare services, it is necessary for the collective efforts of communities to be pooled. This would contribute to building stronger community organisation and achieving self-reliance and sustainability. At 'Uganda' settlement, for instance, the Trust is involved in a co-ordinating committee which demarcates roles, pools resources, especially that of agencies, such as the Child Welfare Society, which has access to state funding.

The Trust's networking programme aims, in the long run, to provide training for community educare motivators, community development officers, fieldworkers and teachers; to address the needs of participating communities to improve conditions for young children; to build and share skills and resources;



Children, Phoenix - Durban. Photo: Ismail Vawda

to develop co-operative forums through which research and policy for educare can be developed; to promote community awareness and participation around educare; to promote non-racialism by breaking down apartheid division and identity; to develop cross cultural interaction through joint participation of children and parents; to provide the opportunity for more developed projects to support lesser developed projects; and to mobilise the educare field at grassroots level and provide the link between regional and national structures.

Within the context of wider political transformation, the Trust also anticipates the development of wider social advocacy and lobbying around issues concerning younger children. The project anticipates that as more communities begin to see the need for services to young children, it will be confronted with a rising demand to meet these communities' needs. Consequently, the project will be pressurised to develop a wider geographical and community outreach.

Community Development Trust