Re Tsoga (we rise up) Community Workshops: Supporting the brain development of children in Limpopo crèches through empowering early educators and fostering community dialogue.

Country of project implementation: South Africa  
Nominating College Designated: Yale University  
Project Leader: Lucy Calcott, South Africa, Yale University

Summary

By conducting a series of workshops for early educators and hosting community knowledge-sharing events, we provided crèche teachers and parents with tools to effectively address the short and long-term negative effects of toxic stress on children's development. We worked to empower early education leaders by holding knowledge-sharing events where teachers led a dialogue with parents on critical issues such as toxic stress, domestic violence and abuse prevention.

Project Description

At our final ReTsoga conference in my hometown of Vaalwater, community leaders voted unanimously on the opening Powerpoint slide for the conference: ‘Our Children Are Our Hope’. The single line captured the hope that has driven this project forward – every child deserves a chance to reach their fullest potential, no matter the conditions they are born into.

My home province of Limpopo, South Africa, has the highest poverty rate in South Africa, with 77% of people living below the poverty line. An intensification of economic difficulties during the coronavirus pandemic and a widespread crisis of domestic violence and child abuse have placed a significant burden of stress on children during their crucial formative years. A child’s first few years are both the most opportune and the most vulnerable for their future trajectory. During this sensitive period, continued activation of the stress response due to ongoing environmental pressures can lead to long-term cognitive impairment and increase vulnerability to disease. The more of this ‘toxic’ stress a child experiences, the greater the likelihood of severe and long-lasting later health problems including depression, heart disease and diabetes.

The ‘Serve and Return’ technique is a method of caregiver-child interaction which has been shown to be highly effective in lowering levels of toxic stress in children experiencing poverty. Through supporting children in lowering their ‘fight or flight’ response, the ‘serve and return’ technique can prevent detrimental, long-term consequences. Because children’s early experiences make such a critical difference to brain development, support in the first years a life makes a significant difference in future life outcomes such as employability, relationship stability and incarceration risk. Furthermore, each dollar invested in providing supports during a child’s first four years can save an economically strained country like South Africa up to 8 times as much over the course of a their lifetime.

In choosing South Africa as the location for this project, I aimed to follow the advice of a mentor who told me: ‘start within the context you know the best and train yourself for impact.’ Vaalwater is my home, and through the course of the project I had the opportunity both to support and be mentored by some of the educators who had once changed my nappies and taught me to hold my pencil. Because of a deep shared understanding, we were able to map core problems and create plans for sustainable long-term solutions on a much shorter timeline. We were also able to connect with community leaders, identify and consult with stakeholders like local chiefs, and meet with parents before we began the training workshops. We already had stakeholder buy-in and knew the terrain we were working in to better predict the outcomes of various interventions.

As we executed the second half of project, during which we met with communities and supported teachers in sharing knowledge, I discovered that we needed to make some adjustments. In the first ‘workshop’ meetings, educators were elected by their peers to lead the community gatherings. However, we discovered that there were opportunities to share skills such as computer literacy, creating powerpoints, organizing and administration with these ‘educator representatives’. Many of those who helped lead and organize the community workshops had never been involved in project management before, and so instead of meeting as a team twice or three times as we had initially
planned, we needed to meet six or seven times to work around busy schedules and provide training. Out of these meetings came innovative ideas and depending on the team, we ended up with very different workshop formats.

Another change to the initial plan was made after we noticed a severe underrepresentation of men in the first community events. We met as two ‘leaders teams’ to discuss the roots of the challenge and how to meet it. Educators shared that a viral Facebook meme called ‘men are not toys’ had spread around the district just days before our conference, a symptom of a recent backlash against father’s involvement in early childhood care. In Modimolle and Vaalwater, we implemented two different plans to increase parental involvement. In Modimolle, we invited the local choir of 58 singers, 40 of whom are men, to open the meeting with our national anthem and some rousing songs. Our district choir is an important and integral part of the community, and once word spread, the participation of fathers increased dramatically as stigma was reduced.

In a Vaalwater leaders meeting, it was suggested that parental attendance could be low due to the message about the community events spreading through women’s networks. We reached out to the local radio station and hosted talks to share information about the event, and again saw a large increase in participation.

As the conferences progressed, we also discovered that we needed translators into local dialects at some of the conference events, and that we needed helpers to set things up and take things down in the venues we used. Community members raised funds from teachers and parents to help pay partially or fully for assistants and translators, and the Boere Voere committee donated money for venues to be cleaned thoroughly after each event.

Reflection

What is Peace?

Peace is more than just the absence of conflict; it is also a state in which people have the chance to thrive, grow in a healthy manner, and reach their fullest potential.

Contributing to peace in the short term

Our community is one that is divided not only along lines of white and black, but also along lines of tribe and proximity to urban settlements. These conferences offered the first ever opportunity in our province for early educators of all backgrounds to meet and discuss issues which are typically taboo, such as domestic abuse and economic hardship, and their influence on the community’s children. In sharing concerns and brainstorming solutions, teachers were provided with immediate tools to use in combatting the increases in toxic stress faced by children in our community.

Especially with an increase in polarising rhetoric from political parties electioneering this year, there were elements of initial distrust, especially where educators came from very different cultural and language backgrounds. However, teachers gradually came to find a camaraderie in their shared struggles. Furthermore, the conferences provided educators with positive outlets to share challenges and find sustainable solutions outside of the extreme alternatives of riots or violent protest that are often the result of educator frustration and lack of supports. As we enter an El Niño year, placing our already strained agricultural region under further pressure, the conferences allowed educators to discuss critical measures to support students and maintain peace – including resource sharing and teachers’ groups for spreading information about relief aid and medical resources.

Contributing to peace in the long-term

The crisis of toxic stress in our communities not only represents a tragedy for individuals but also a significant threat to South Africa’s prospects for enduring peace. According to a recent IMF report, South Africa’s GDP fell sharply in 2023, an illustration of unemployment levels reaching an all-time high. Toxic stress in early childhood and the cognitive changes it causes inhibit development of affective reasoning, problem-solving and planning skills, putting a child at higher risk of poor school
performance, dropping out of school and turning to illegal methods of income generation. A study by the Department of Basic Education last year found that in Limpopo 48% of students drop out of school before their final year. These students are much less likely to find a job and are at higher risk of involvement in crime to provide for their families. In 2023, prices of our staple food have risen 14.4% year on year. Providing a solid early childhood foundation through reducing levels of toxic stress has been shown to significantly increase student retention rates and is correlated with higher long-term earnings. Good affective reasoning skills are also correlated with job retention and relational stability. In a climate of escalating unemployment and civil unrest, increasing children's chances of being able to finish school, find and keep a job, and develop healthy relationships is crucial to maintaining our fragile peace.

Throughout the conference planning, we encountered a major challenge in electricity 'load shedding'. Due to a massive deficit in South Africa's energy production, we experience daily 5 - 11 hour power black-outs across the country. This posed a significant challenge for our team. On first conference day, we were unable to enter the municipal buildings for two hours because the power had shut off, the generator was broken, and the electric gate was frozen in the 'locked' position. On another day the power went off just before the caterers were able to cook the food they had prepared, or the generator ran out of fuel and the entire sound system stopped working. While these issues initially seemed trivial, over time I found them leaving me frustrated and weary. Each power outage served as a reminder of the scale of the challenge we faced. However, after sharing my frustration with the educator team, I remember one co-leaders turning to me warmly and said 'don't worry! We don't need speakers - I have a loud enough voice to wake everybody up!' The persistence and grit of our team taught me a lasting lesson about courage and have given me strength to keep trusting that South Africa's people are our greatest asset. There is always strength to be found if we search for it. There is always a plan to be made if we can think clearly and rally around the challenge. In recent years, many who have the financial means have fled our country in fear of South Africa's collapse, but if the spirit of the educators I was privileged to serve with this summer is anything to learn from, then hope is far from lost!

**Personal Statement**

By providing a strong foundation during children's formative first years, we can create a ripple effect of stability for the next generation and contribute to long-term peace. Throughout this project, I have been inspired by the hope that can be found when social innovators are given the opportunity to stand together against a common challenge and draw on their wisdom to generate solutions. - Lucy