

FROM LEARNING TOGETHER TO WORKING TOGETHER

THE STORY OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT LEARNING COMMUNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

By Doug Reeler of the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA)

Late in 2006 we were approached by Nyambura Rugoiya of the Bernard van Leer Foundation¹ to facilitate and coordinate a community of practice of all of their 18 partner organisations working in four provinces of South Africa, all in the field of Early Childhood Development. They had already spoken to their partners and gained agreement for this and had a few ideas of what they might like to see.

I jumped at the opportunity. I had recently researched and written a paper on horizontal learning² and was keen to work on a more substantial initiative around this.

I proposed an initiating workshop with partners to test the feasibility of the proposal and develop a design in a full process. A few months later, in March 2007, the first workshop happened, south of Durban, in a small beach hotel there. Each organisation was invited to send their director and a practitioner. Apart from a loose workshop process, no proposals or agendas were developed to sell to the participants, as we realised that although the donor had initiated the process it was critical that it should not drive it, that this should be fully co-creative.

It was a 5-day process but was not plain sailing. A few partners came there doubtful of the benefits of something they had never tried before, others a little suspicious of the motivation behind this. Some of the more rural, African-led partners, unused to this kind of process, struggled to find their voice amidst the more confident and assertive opinions of the more urban, often white-led partners. But most were open and game to try, characteristic of practitioners who seem to draw their energy from the openness and playfulness of young children. It took 5 days of creative process, sharing views on the context, surfacing and deepening questions, describing practice, debating the different approaches at play, working from the past through the present and into the future until we arrived at a leading image, a vision of why and how we might learn together. The workshoping was mixed in with frequent drawing and sculpting exercises, role-plays, much singing, and every day a session where partners played children's games and revealing the thinking behind them, the kind of activities that they themselves promoted back home. The workshop not only planned how partners might learning together; it was itself an experience of that.

The core elements of what then became known as the ECD Learning Community were:

1. **The purpose of the ECDLC:** *This learning community is a collaboration of partners of the Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF) for the purposes of sharing experiences and learning, of building knowledge and of collaborating in various ways to improve practice and policies in the ECD sector;*
2. **Learning Workshops:** there would be 4-day Learning Workshops every 6 months with 2 members from each, including the director;
3. **Exchange visits:** each partner would have a fund of R25 000 available per year to enable it to visit other partners, to learn from and share with them;

¹ A private Dutch funder which focuses on early childhood development

² Doug Reeler "Horizontal Learning – engaging freedom's possibilities" 2005, www.cdra.org.za

4. **Organisation Development support:** a fund was made available for CDRA to work individually with partners who required it, to help build their organisational capacity., to help equalise their participation in the learning community;
5. **A website and email list:** to enable cross-communication and have a common platform for sharing materials;
6. **An action research programme:** to surface local and indigenous practices and knowledge by communities in caring for young children (this came a year later).

Nyambura Rugoiya, who participated in the process, took the proposal back to the donor and it was approved and within two months activities began.

It has been a remarkable journey of mutual learning, and increasingly working, together. In all of our reviews, the horizontal exchanges, 32 to date, have stood out as the most beneficial, unlocking some surprising capacities in both host and visitors and forging relationships that have lasted well beyond the initial phase. The workshops, every 6 months, provided a boost and a platform for new kinds of programming and strategic thinking that has now shifted the practices of many of the members. For the rural members, being exposed to others in such an equalising and participative forum, has boosted their confidence and leadership. The participative action research programme, that brought out the rich child-rearing traditions and practices of communities themselves, also helped the members to begin to question some of the top-down, western-oriented practices of early childhood that they have promoted, and to pay more respect to the resourcefulness that lives inside communities and how this can be seen and activated.

Jump forward now 5 years later. The ECDLC has shifted, over time, from being focused on own mutual learning to holding between itself a major working collaboration around what we call the Letsema Programme. This emerged from a major shift in thinking, when it was realised that as NGOs they could not effectively hold the centre of gravity in the kind of project work they were trying to do, that this would have to move to the heart of the communities they were working in. They have learned from each other, through exploring their experience, that change can only come through grassroots mobilisation, through communities building their own and each other's capacity and organisation and through this engaging society, especially government, to co-produce services for young children.

In the Letsema programme, in essence, the partners are mobilising the community-based caregiver groups that they have worked with over the years, to themselves visit each other, learn from each other and boost each other's knowledge and capacities, and in the process develop relationships and a grassroots solidarity as the foundation for a movement that engages government in a co-creative way around the well-being of young children. It is still early days but the energy around this is refreshing and the practitioners frequently express their relief to be breaking from project-thinking. A grassroots leadership development process is now underway that will include, early in 2013, a visit by 14 community leaders and 7 practitioners from different districts of the Limpopo Province, to India to learn from practices there to bring back to South Africa. As a learning journey we expect that not only will they learn from what they do in India, but they will learn as much from each other and in particular they will learn how to cooperate and collaborate into the future.

The ECD Learning Community has launched the Letsema Programme in four provinces and drawn in more collaborating partners. However the foundations that are enabling this co-working are the learning relationships that were forged in the horizontal learning exchanges and workshops of the first few years of the life of the Learning Community. It is a learning process not bound by clear outcomes and deadlines, guided by principles and a vision, but open to process, open to what will be discovered along the way.