

From the Heart Of An African Village
(An Experience of the Essentials of Early Childhood Education)
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Day 1: (cold and raining)

“There's the kindergarten!” Ruth Majoweni beamed proudly as she pointed down the muddy village road, past the goats and geese and pigs, past the smiling waving children, past the muddy brick huts, and past the village dam. We could see it in the distance -- a brightly painted tin shed (about the size of an Australian backyard tool shed), set in the corner of a fenced grassy field. A few minutes and many potholes later (a wonderful advertisement for the endurance capacity of a Toyota sedan), our car eventually arrived at the gap in the fence -- apparently there used to be a gate but it had been stolen by one of the neighboring villagers.

So while Ruth visited the house next door to pick up the key to the shed (everything in the Transkei is now under lock and key!), the long-distance travelers piled out of the car to stretch their legs. There were four of us who had traveled the 1400 km (875 miles) journey from The Centre for Creative Education in Capetown on an invitation from Ruth to visit her kindergarten and introduce Waldorf education to her village. And over the next six days, each one of us would have an important role to play in this exciting new adventure in the heart of the Transkei (homeland of the Xhosa people of South Africa).

Firstly, John Adam, our Aussie driver, photographer, carpenter and fix-anything-man. Then, Nomangesi Mzamo - Xhosa community developer and dynamic/colorful P.R. person. Thirdly, Maria Msebenzi - Educare trainer and invaluable Xhosa speaking co-worker. And lastly, myself, Susan Perrow - kindergarten trainer, report writer and adventure-seeking Australian.

Now, with the door unlocked, we were invited to look inside. We stepped in onto an old linoleum floor, while Ruth lifted the hessian bags off the two tiny windows to let in some sunlight. The room was about 3 1/2 square meters of empty space - no chairs, tables, cupboards or toys. I had so many questions, but decided to wait till the next morning to experience firsthand how 25 little children fitted into such a tiny room, and what they did there!

Day 2: (dawned sunny and bright)

Twenty-five little children, aged from 3 to 6 years, arrived at 9:00 at the kindergarten, each one carrying a tiny backpack (with morning tea inside) and a plastic chair on their head (my first question answered!). They were led by their teacher, Noziqhamo, who was carrying a broom, a roll of toilet paper, a bucket of water, and some plastic drinking cups. She apparently gathers the children each morning as she walks from her house on the other side of the village, then returns them home at lunch time for their afternoon rest.

The chairs were then left outside, the backpacks piled in the corner of the room (one of my first “practical” tasks was to have 25 large nails hammered into the wall for the bags to hang on!) Any children who needed to use the toilet were sent out into the grass or to the little toilet house in the corner of the neighboring field. Then they were all called in, lined up in rows, and prayers were chanted and sung, followed by many different instructional songs, (i.e., songs about numbers, body parts, etc.)

At about 10:30 it was morning tea, and then the children came outside for an hour's "play" -this seemed to consist of either running around or sitting on chairs. Then the group was back inside for "story-time", but the teacher, instead of telling the story (She later said she knew very few stories.) asked several children to share their own stories.

Then the children were given some water to drink, the teacher swept the room and locked the door, and they all walked back home, carrying backpacks, chairs, broom, bucket and cups.

That night I lay awake for hours! I was excited by the potential of such a simple situation in such a peaceful, rural setting, but shocked by the artistic/cultural impoverishment I had found here - I had hoped the teacher would have been a source of traditional African stories. I had also hoped to learn basket weaving and beadwork here, but the 15 mothers who had turned up to my workshop that afternoon all said they did no craft or art work anymore (no money for materials). They drank up the activities I shared with them, and sang (even danced!) with joy as they worked - making simple "toys" for the kindergarten (knotted dolls, porn-porn balls, finger-knitted horse reigns and brightly-colored wool baskets).

I had also not expected to find a numbers/letters instructional style program in a kindergarten in rural Africa (the walls of the tin shed were lined with "teaching" posters - the alphabet, geometric shapes, colors, numbers, etc.) - totally unsuited to the needs of young preschool age children, who need to learn through play and through *doing/active* situations. I was realizing that in the Black Africans desperation for their children to have a *good education* (to try to make up for all the deprived Apartheid years) the little ones were missing out on a vital and natural part of childhood - learning through play. Even though I had experienced this instructional "play-less" approach many times in the Educate centers in the townships of Capetown, I had not expected to find the same in the Transkei.

The challenge of our short (one week) visit was to demonstrate the Waldorf approach to early childhood education. My first concern was how to make changes without insulting the teacher? However, I was ensured by both Ruth (the "Principal") and Nozighamo (the teacher) that they had heard so many wonderful things about our training college (note: Ruth is a current student of our 3 year part-time Educare Course), and they were very enthusiastic for us to do as much as possible in the short time we were there.

And so, as I continued lying awake through the quiet Transkei night, a plan for the next few days started to take shape, color and form. My priorities were to encourage creative play (inside and outside), storytelling, and ring time (songs and joyous games), as well as to "beautify" the room in a simple low-cost way (the budget for materials brought from Capetown was R300 -about \$100 Australian or \$60 U.S.). Mother Nature was to be the obvious helper here, providing bountiful materials for creative play (wood pieces, stones, seeds, pods, gum nuts, shells, fleece and feathers), musical instruments for games (a pumpkin drum and seed pod shakers), and flowers and other "treasures" for the nature table. All these natural resources (except for the shells collected at the coast on our way) were in plentiful supply in and around the village. Now all that was needed was a small storage cupboard for the corner, which could also be used as the "nature table".

Note: The R300 had already been spent before we left Capetown, on timber, screws and hinges for 4 cubby house frames, 10 balls of colored wool for craft-work, and a selection of cloth remnants -large ones for house building and room decorating, and small cloth pieces for doll-making, story pictures and creative play.

Fortunately, all these ideas eventually merged with African dreams and I slept the last 5 hours till the roosters and dogs and geese woke me with their morning music.

Day 3: (misty but clearing to a warm, sunny day)

Leaving John on the verandah of Ruth's home still busy building the cubby house frames, and Nomangesi to do her community networking (an important meeting to organize with the Village Committee), Maria and I loaded two boxes of wood pieces and natural materials into the car, and an old cupboard on the roof - just perfect for the corner of the kindergarten room - Ruth found it in her shed!) We then set off very slowly along the potholed road on a 5 minute drive to the kindergarten on the other side of the village.

We arrived in time to meet the children outside, and some of the older ones helped me carry in the cupboard, cover the top with a golden cloth and the selection of dolls the parents had made the previous afternoon, and then unload the wooden blocks and tins of shells, gum nuts, etc. into the shelves. I felt it was important that the children be involved with the new "toys" in their room right from the unpacking stage.

Meanwhile, as we had planned, Maria led the rest of the children through the long grass at the bottom of the playground, gathering yellow and purple wildflowers and singing as she walked. The flowers were then placed in a vase (an old milk jug) and brought inside to sit in the center of the "golden" cloth. The children then sat in a semi-circle in front of their beautiful new cupboard, and a hushed mood of WONDER penetrated the room. In this mood, Maria then told a story, a simple everyday story about a mother cooking breakfast for her child. She used two of the knotted dolls, several wood blocks to make the table and chairs, some large shells for bowls, and gum nuts and teased fleece for "food". At the end of the story, the children watched as Maria carefully returned each "toy" to its place in the cupboard. And then she invited each child, one by one, to come and choose some "toys" to play with - all the while singing a beautiful song in Xhosa about a mother who had many children who loved to play.

For the next half hour I sat in the corner and watched the children play (note - this inside playtime increased to an hour by our third day there). This was one of the most satisfying moments of my entire teaching career, and certainly made up for every moment of sleep lost the night before! All these little African children were playing, for the first time in their kindergarten room - playing with care, with concentration, with creativity, with JOY! - and with such a simple selection of materials! Even their teacher, Noziqhamo, was totally absorbed in playing.

(As I sat and watched, I was reminded of the time I had lived in Africa 15 years ago, when my 3 sons were very young. I had learned so much watching my boys play with African children with simple natural materials that this simplicity later penetrated my work as a pre-school teacher in Australia, with the important understanding that "A healthy toy is 90% imagination". How amazing to now be back in Africa helping to revive simple play! And storytelling as well!)

At the end of inside play we encouraged the children to help with a thorough pack-up - it was important for them to know that each "toy" had its own special home. Then we gathered the whole group into a circle with a wonderful Xhosa circle song, "Masenz, isangqa sonke, singa bantwana na" (Let us make a circle, we are little children). Maria then sang several more Xhosa songs, and I followed these with some music games in English using some simple props - a pumpkin for a drum, and some seed pod shakers for musical instruments.

The children then had morning tea, and after this it was outside play time. By the second day John had finished the cubby frames, so I introduced these at outside time as there was not enough room inside. With cloths for roofs and walls, they proved to be a wonderful shelter from the hot African sun. At first, all the children wanted to do was take their chairs and sit inside (sometimes 10 in one house!), but soon they started to enjoy building wood and brick pathways (using a pile of old bricks and planks from the corner of the yard) and interacting between houses, (Over the next three days I also introduced some

games at outside time, and John made plastic-bag kites with the school children who had started to gather outside the fence, very curious to know what we were doing!

After an hour of outside play, we then led the children inside with a singing game, and Maria ended the morning with a traditional African story (using simple puppets and a story board). It was a story about two pigs and a hyena, very similar to the English tale of The Three Little Pigs, and one of many African stories that is beautifully suited for young children.

Day 4: (and onwards)

For three days we repeated this morning rhythm, using the same songs and stories each day, and Noziqhamo was enthusiastic to continue this rhythm after our departure (especially the inside and outside playtime), starting each day with the children gathering spring flowers (or autumn grasses) for the nature table.

Of course, more time and more visits will be needed to explore storytelling, ring time, festival celebrations and many more of the deeper aspects of our early childhood work. Some activities would be impossible to introduce without a continual flow of outside funds (there is no money in the community, and the kindergarten fees are only R10 per month - about A\$3.50). Kindergarten activities that we take for granted in our countries, e.g., painting, drawing, sewing, wool crafts, cooking, sand and water play, etc., are all not possible if there is no money available or no water on tap.

However, the *essentials* of working with young children (simple play, rhythm and imitation, storytelling, songs and games, joy and love) are possible in any and every situation, as this visit to the Transkei proved to us and to the kindergarten there. "The Waldorf approach takes us back to our roots" said one of the teachers, remembering her own simple and playful childhood.

Our contribution seemed to be enthusiastically received by children and adults alike, and on our last evening a sheep was slaughtered in our honor, and a farewell party was held - six hours of eating, singing and dancing. A never-to-be-forgotten occasion! We had really been welcomed into the hearts of these wonderful people.

As we drove away the next day (to the beautiful sound of African singing) we knew a healthy seed had been sewn and was already sprouting. And as we passed many villages, in the valleys, on the hillsides and on the hilltops, we wondered how many more seeds could be planted in this African homeland.

We returned to Capetown radiant with our experience, and all four of us look forward to the next journey back to the heart of an African village.