
Ten years of early childhood development: a case study of Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education

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Abstract

The last decade has seen considerable changes in the field of Early Childhood Development (ECD). This paper focuses on change within and around a single ECD training organisation, Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education (LETCEE). Established in 1991 in Greytown, LETCEE started as a pre-school, took on training for ECD educators, and later worked in ECD as an aspect of community development. LETCEE has been shaped by the increasing formalization and regulation of the field, on the one hand, and its evolving understanding of ECD as a part of community development, on the other. This historical case study explores LETCEE as a unique organisation with its own contextually specific history, and as a microcosm of the evolving ECD field. It draws attention to the critically important but neglected area of Early Childhood Development within South African educational research.

Introduction

During the apartheid era, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) played a prominent role in the provision of early childhood development (ECD) services to black children, who were largely neglected by the apartheid government. The role of ECD NGOs in the post-apartheid era has shifted to one of uneasy partnership as a new ECD dispensation has unfolded over the last decade with an increasing formalization, regulation and institutionalization of the field. The history of Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education (LETCEE), a small, Greytown-based ECD NGO in the Midlands region of KwaZulu-Natal, roughly coincides with the democratic era. This study examines developments within the ECD field as reflected and refracted within the situated experience of LETCEE as a local role player. It

presents a historical case study of the organisation in the context of ECD policy development and implementation. It argues that the tension between the formalizing requirements of the state and an engagement with community needs has shaped LETCEE's evolution. Data collection methods included a review of the secondary literature, interviews with key members of the organisation, analysis of documentary sources and site visits. The study seeks to contribute to a neglected aspect of the history of civil society, as well as to provide a perspective on developments within the broader ECD field.

While there have been some studies and overviews of the ECD field in South Africa (Van den Berg and Vergani, 1986; 1987; Padayachee, Atmore, Biersteker and Evans, 1994; Department of Education, 2001; Porteus, 2004), very little intensive research has been conducted on local ECD organisational settings. One exception is Haggie's (1994) historical study of the African Self Help Association, which was central to the development of the pre-school movement in Soweto. Van den Berg and Vergani (1986) provide a useful survey of ECD organisations at a moment in the 1980s, and their 1987 collection of readings (Van den Berg and Vergani, 1987) presents some brief case studies of ECD organisations (see Richards on Grassroots and Malepa on Entokozweni); and the National Audit commissioned by the Department of Education (2001) presents an overview of provisioning in the field in the early democratic era. A dedicated issue of *Perspectives in Education* (June 2004) focuses mainly on theoretical models and ECD programmes and methodologies. The present study offers a textured account of the relation between local needs and dynamics, as embodied in a small non-governmental organisation, and the national environment of policy and implementation.

This article also seeks to understand the peculiar development of LETCEE as a non-governmental organisation in its own terms. It will draw on the literature on the life cycles of non-governmental organisations (Korten, 1990) in order to characterise this development. It will locate LETCEE within Korten's generational framework of organisational development. The first section will focus on LETCEE's direct provision of education to children, the second on its educator training, the third on interaction with the wider ECD field, and the fourth on LETCEE's role in community development. The sequence of sections is thematic rather than strictly chronological and this involves some movement backwards and forwards in time. A brief discussion of Korten's theory will establish the theoretical framework for the study.

Korten (1990, p.113-132) identifies four stages or “generations” of non-governmental organisations, each of which has its own orientation towards action and development. The first generation has a relief and welfare orientation. NGOs of this generation provide direct delivery of services to meet immediate needs or shortages. Second generation organisations, recognising that relief and welfare can at best provide temporary alleviation of the symptoms of underdevelopment, seek to develop self-reliance among communities at a local level through small-scale community development. Third generation organisations, frustrated by the problems of sustainability arising in small-scale projects which are dependent on foreign funding and on the agency of the NGO, and by the absence of large-scale impacts, look beyond the individual community. They seek changes in policies and institutions at local, national and global levels. A fourth generation recognises that this orientation is also flawed by endless duplication of effort across government departments in an often hostile environment. They prioritise the facilitation of ‘a global people’s movement’ and act as service organisations to people’s movements in this quest.

Korten recognises that all “generations” of organisations have a contribution to make but sees the movement from one generation to the next as an evolutionary progression, “each moving further away from alleviating symptoms toward attacking ever more fundamental causes” (Korten, 1990, p.115), with the fourth generation the most advanced stage. Korten’s schema provides a useful tool for analysing the roles and orientations of NGOs engaged in development. However, it needs to be located within the messy specificities of context and history in relation to actual organisations. In South Africa, for example, many progressive NGOs in a variety of fields such as health and education participated actively in the anti-apartheid movement, thus playing a fourth generation role in Korten’s terms. However, in the democratic era these organisations did not levitate to some kind of fifth generation nirvana. Many closed down because funding dried up (Aitchison, 2003; Baatjes, 2003; Morrow, 2004). Others struggled to redefine their roles, sometimes taking on second or third generation profiles. Others still morphed into commercial entities, and specialised in acquiring and servicing contracts in the public and private sectors (see Morrow, 2004). The experiences of South African NGOs suggests that NGO development does not necessarily follow a linear sequence of progression through “generations”, based solely on an expanding vision of development and deepening analysis of society, and that the specificities and constraints of context and history are crucial in shaping them.

Rising to the challenge: Little Elephant Pre-school

In terms of Korten's (1990) schema, LETCEE had its origins as a first generation organisation in that it was responding to immediate needs for educare in the Greytown area. Little Elephant was established in 1991 as a pre-school housed at the local St James Anglican church and initiated by the rector. It occupied premises on the church property. The school was set up in response to the Anglican Synod of 1989 that challenged local congregations to establish pre-schools. The context of ECD provision at the time was one of massive inequality. The apartheid government had provided virtually no pre-school services for black children. A study undertaken in 1992 found that only 6 per cent of black children in South Africa, as opposed to one third of white children, had access to an ECD site and that the differential between expenditure per capita on white children and black children exceeded 40 (Padayachee, Atmore, Biersteker and Evans, 1994).

Besides poor and unequal ECD facilities, the Greytown area was characterised by high levels of poverty and unemployment. As a LETCEE annual report states:

We have to spend a great deal of our time trying to help the students to deal with the consequences of the extreme poverty in which they work viz.: lack of food for children, little or no fees being paid, which means no income for the teachers and greatly limited facilities both in terms of buildings and equipment (Annual Report, 1998, p.2).

Additional contextual problems included unreliable public transport, sporadic taxi violence, and political violence around the times of elections.

Little Elephant was an innovative initiative in that it admitted children from all races at a time when schooling was largely segregated in South Africa. The approach was 'multi-racial' rather than non-racial at first, with a 'tricameral' admission policy of one third white, one third African, and one third coloured and Indian children. This policy changed when a parent challenged it as racist. The first principal, who later became director of LETCEE, remembers that the reaction of the white community in Greytown to the school was hostile. "It was a 'communist plot' with Archbishop Tutu making waves and the church taking in black children" (James, 2004). The local branch of Child Welfare, which ran a day care centre, felt threatened by the new school, and the host congregation, besides the rector and a small, committed group of supporters, was indifferent or antagonistic. Some congregants, for example, did not want

the black children using the toilets. At a local level, Little Elephant thus played a significant but difficult role in the movement towards a non-racial society within the ECD field, the local church and the Greytown community.

The focus of the pre-school was on building relationships with the children, encouraging constructive play and preparing them for life. The curriculum was informal, based on relationships and exploration (James, 2004). This child-centred approach contrasted with the dominant teacher-centred approach in the state schooling system at the time, an approach which persists within ECD to the present (see, for example, Prinsloo and Stein, 2004).

The pre-school expanded rapidly in its first year, indicating the vast need for such a service. Whereas 6 children had registered for the school, 12 arrived on the first day. By the end of the first week, there were 17 and by the fourth term 47. Towards the end of 1991, Little Elephant was confronted with the prospect of children graduating from the pre-school with nowhere to go because schools were not yet racially integrated. “It was an incredibly naive thing to do – we hadn’t thought of what would happen to the kids” (James, 2004). In 1992 Little Elephant started a Grade 1 class in addition to its pre-school to accommodate the children moving up, adding Grade 2 in 1993 and Grade 3 in 1994. Within four years, what had started as a pre-school initiative had expanded to include a fully-fledged junior primary school, named St Davids. In 1997 plans to separate the schools began, and in 1998 St Davids moved off the site and became an independent primary school. LETCEE thus shed its primary school component and continued to work in the ECD field.

At a national level, there was activity around ECD policy principles and proposals in the early 1990s. The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) produced a sectoral report on ECD in 1993 (National Education Policy Investigation, 1993), identifying inequalities of provisioning, fragmented access to ECD services, and inequitable and inadequate training as shortcomings within the field. It argued against privatisation of ECD services, placed the central responsibility for the subsidisation of ECD services on the state, and called for increased expenditure on ECD. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the African National Congress’s (ANC) main policy platform for the 1994 elections, affirmed the need for increased public and private funding of ECD, and assigned ultimate responsibility for ECD policy and implementation to the government.

These broad policy initiatives had minimal effect on Little Elephant as they were far removed from actual implementation on the ground. However, in 1996 the ANC shifted away from the ambitious social agenda of the RDP to the market oriented Growth, Equality and Redistribution (GEAR) Plan. GEAR placed primary emphasis within economic policy on productivity and competitiveness in the global market economy, and this had the effect of cutting back social investment and reorienting education policy towards macroeconomic goals. Porteus (2004) argues that the macroeconomic determinants within GEAR had a far greater impact on ECD than educational considerations. This applied equally to other peripheral sectors of education such as Adult Basic Education and Training (Baatjes, 2003; Baatjes and Mathe, 2004). In 1996 the government launched a National Audit of the ECD field as well as a pilot project for a Reception Year for five-year-olds. LETCEE became involved in both these initiatives, which marked the beginning of a phase of growing influence of national government ECD initiatives on LETCEE. Little Elephant school was one of the pilot sites for the Grade R project.

Two trends within Little Elephant School became apparent from the late 1990s. The first was a decline in numbers. From a high of 63 children in the pre-school in 1995, numbers fell steadily to 52 in 1997, 47 in 1999 and 25 by 2003 when questions about the viability of the school began to come to the fore (LETCEE Annual Reports, 1997, 1999, 2003). The reason for this was the number of pre-schools springing up in Greytown. Little Elephant was thus ironically a victim of the expansion of provision within the ECD field which it pioneered in the Greytown area. Another trend was an end to the multi-ethnic character of the school. The 'non-racial' moment of the early 1990s passed as white parents placed their children in other schools and the school body became predominantly black African. Staff experienced this as a loss. As one staff member put it, the pre-school was "impoverished by losing its multi-ethnicity – the exposure to people's languages and cultures" (James, 2004).

LETCEE Educator Training

In 1992 the centre was formally constituted as LETCEE . That year LETCEE began, in addition to running a pre-school, the training of pre-school educators. On the one hand, this was in response to a need within local communities for educator training. Again, this was an innovative initiative as very little training was available for black pre-school educators during the

apartheid era. What was available was closed down by the government. For example, in 1953 the Anglican Mission Training College for nursery school teachers, Dikonyaneng, was forced to close in Soweto (Haggie, 1994). Training for black ECD practitioners was largely curtailed after 1958 (Porteus, 2004). In the larger Greytown area, there were many women either actually running or wishing to start creches from their homes or from community centres who had not been trained. They approached Little Elephant with requests for training and assistance. Most of the LETCEE trainees came from rural areas around Greytown, particularly the impoverished Tugela valley: Tugela Ferry (west of Greytown) and Ntunjambili (east).

On the other hand, the initiation of training was a response to a funder's prompting. When Little Elephant approached Nedbank for funding, the bank proposed that Little Elephant establish a "teacher outreach programme". Little Elephant conducted a needs survey and the first six trainees were recruited in 1993.

The National Audit (Department of Education, 2001) found that 72 per cent of ECD sites were either community-based (49 per cent) or home-based (34 per cent), while only 17 per cent were school-based. The vast majority of educators in the Greytown area came from community-based or home-based sites where working mothers left their children for the day. Besides a lack of training, the educators who approached LETCEE struggled with a lack of equipment, poor facilities and very little income because parents or other caregivers could not afford fees.

Initially, the training was not formalized and the curriculum was shaped by the needs of the trainees as they arose. Staff visited trainees at their sites fortnightly, winding down into the vast Tugela River valley and negotiating the rough rural roads in the parish bakkie. They monitored very closely what was changing in the students' practice and worked specifically in relation to their circumstances. For example, they helped students to set up administrative systems for recording attendance, fees and children's progress at their sites, and to make their own equipment out of waste materials. "I think we saw real changes quite quickly", remembers the director (James, 2004). However, at the outset of the training, staff were not yet aware of the need to develop the sustainability of ECD sites. "We didn't think to work with the community" (James, 2004). The thorough integration of ECD with community development was to come later in LETCEE's approach as staff learnt about the relation.

In 1993, the Durban-based ECD organisation, Training and Resources in Early Education (TREE), agreed to allow LETCEE to use its training curriculum. In 1994 LETCEE held its first Foundation Course with 13 trainees and began to hold training in communities such as Tugela Ferry. This enabled local practitioners, who could not afford transport fees to Greytown, to attend. By 1995 courses offered included Foundation (an introduction to Early Childhood Development), School Readiness (focusing on preparing children for school), and Themes (focusing on what and how to teach pre-school children). In that year, LETCEE staff addressed a number of parent meetings at rural schools and the director addressed a forum of traditional leaders. Through this interaction with local communities, LETCEE began to appreciate the centrality of community involvement to the success of ECD initiatives:

LETCEE has become very aware of the need to develop the community of each creche in order that the parents realize the importance of educate and begin to accept responsibility for the creche. Without their 'ownership' of it, the creche seldom operates effectively and the teacher is not accountable to anyone (Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education, 1995, p.2).

Following from this, LETCEE planned a series of Parent Awareness Workshops and Committee Skills Training to develop awareness around ECD and capacity for centre governance in local communities, thus deepening its identity as a second generation NGO concerned with issues of development.

By 1996 LETCEE was training 150 trainees per year and began to use the Little Elephant pre-school as an observation site for trainees. This enabled the trainees "to see exactly the concepts that which have been dealt with in the theory lessons" (Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education, 1996, p.2). The course also involved trainees being visited at their ECD sites in the community by field workers. Besides supporting the trainees, the fieldworkers played an important role in fulfilling the vision of ECD awareness-raising and capacity building envisaged in the 1995 report. This extended LETCEE community education role, but also its own learning:

the fieldworkers have spent many hours talking to creche committees, community leaders and parents. This has meant regular feedback to us with regard to community needs, problems and interests and in turn explains the benefits of pre-school education and teaches basic hygiene and Aids information to the rural communities (Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education, 1996, p.2).

Thus the practical concern of LETCEE to support trainees in their communities began to shape a broader vision of ECD within the context of community development. At the same time, however, a different imperative arising from the government began to assert itself from the late 1990s, that of regulation and formalization of the ECD field. This did not necessarily complement LETCEE's shift to community development and a tension between the two imperatives became increasingly evident.

By 1998 LETCEE's training curriculum had taken on a more formal appearance and reflected the language of Outcomes-based Education. Various courses were pegged at levels defined within the National Qualifications Framework, from level 1 (equivalent to nine years of formal schooling) to level 4 (equivalent to first year of tertiary study). It consisted of an introductory Foundation Course (level 1), an Inkulisa (pre-school) course (level 2), and the TREE Higher Educare Course (level 3). The 1999 annual report identifies these courses at levels 1, 2 and 4 respectively of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which is mentioned for the first time, and in 1999 LETCEE also offered workshops on OBE. There was also a growing emphasis on forms of assessment. By 2000 LETCEE offered three courses: an Introduction to ECD; a National Certificate in ECD (level 1); and a National Certificate in ECD (level 4). In 2003 LETCEE won a tender from the Education Training and Development Practitioner Sectoral Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA) to offer an ECD level 4 learnership in the Greytown area. It also gained accreditation from this SETA as an ECD training provider in 2003.

One clear trend in LETCEE's training has been its expansion, from six trainees in 1993 to 150 in 1996, and 223 in 2003. LETCEE has trained over 2000 pre-school educators since its inception, attesting to the positive perception of LETCEE training by local educators and their 'word-of-mouth' advertising. This growth is also partly accounted for by the recognition and sponsorship of ECD research, pilot projects and learnerships by the government. Another trend has been increasing formalization, from an informal curriculum in 1993 shaped by the needs of the trainees as they arose, to credit-bearing National Certificates in 2000 based on Core Unit Standards recognised by the South African Qualifications Authority and placed within the National Qualifications Framework. Thus the evolution of training within LETCEE has been powerfully shaped by government policy. One benefit of formalization is that training is more uniform across organisations and of a higher quality: "we've adopted each other's methods and shared ideas and

experiences” (James, 2004). On the other hand, the bureaucratic load has increased with the administrative and assessment requirements of learnerships, and the increase in numbers has made the training encounter more impersonal and less responsive to particular circumstances. The interaction with government bureaucrats and the reliance on government funding for training, which is often delayed, has added to stress levels within the organisation.

Engaging with the wider field

In 1992 Little Elephant entered an ECD field that was fragmented with little co-operation between ECD organisations in KwaZulu-Natal. Staff members ventured outside the province for assistance, visiting the Border Early Learning Centre in East London and using this training organisation as a model for establishing an educator training programme. Relations among ECD organisations in KwaZulu-Natal improved from the mid-1990s. LETCEE forged strong ties with Training Resources in Early Education (TREE), a major ECD training organisation based in Durban, and began to use the TREE training materials from 1994. This relationship evolved into a KwaZulu-Natal ECD consortium which included other organisations. In 1996 the government launched a National Audit of the ECD field as well as a pilot project for a Reception Year for five-year-olds. LETCEE, as part of a consortium with TREE, New Beginnings and Zululand Educare, successfully tendered for the training in KwaZulu-Natal for the National Reception Year Pilot Project. This process involved a modification of existing curricula to conform with the requirements of Outcomes-Based Education and Curriculum 2005. LETCEE staff were also involved in the selection of sites in the Pietermaritzburg and Ladysmith areas for the pilot project and in assessing the prior learning of educators.

As part of a slightly different consortium, LETCEE also participated in the National Audit of pre-school facilities. The consortium visited 6 450 sites in the province. LETCEE managed the Pietermaritzburg region of the audit, where over 1 200 sites were visited. LETCEE’s involvement in the audit exposed the organisation to conditions within the field across the province, which included a number of common problems such as a lack of ownership of ECD sites by parents, non-payment of school fees, lack of equipment and low levels of educator training. LETCEE staff members also attended national meetings around the audit which provided the organisation with a wider picture of ECD, and allowed it to network and become known nationally. One

of the benefits of government ECD policy initiatives, therefore, has been the consolidation of the field through processes of joint government-NGO action and the concurrent sharing of ideas and development of relationships.

During the mid-1990s, LETCEE participated actively in the development of national ECD unit standards. At a provincial level, it developed curricula as part of the KZN ECD consortium. As part of wider provincial and national networks, LETCEE thus played a 'third generation' role in contributing to ECD policies and procedures, while simultaneously engaging in first and second generation activities. However, engagement in isolated activities does not necessarily characterise the overall orientation of an organisation. In this regard, LETCEE appeared to move gradually and at times unevenly through the 1990s and into the new millennium from a first generation orientation to providing education for children and training for practitioners, to a second generation orientation towards ECD development within the context of community development. This is epitomized in the *Izingane Zethu* project discussed below.

LETCEE and community development

In 1996 LETCEE's shift to community development was reflected in its statement of aims: "Our aim is to empower the marginalised rural women of the area and to improve the quality of pre-school education which is offered" (Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education, 1996, p.1). It initiated a community development project which involved holding community and parent meetings to raise awareness about the importance of ECD and to encourage community support of, and involvement in local ECD centres. Staff members also addressed parents' misconceptions that an ECD centre was "school" and that children should be learning "a, e, i, o, u" to make it worthwhile (Mzila, 2004).

By 2001 the community development thrust had become more explicit in LETCEE's aims, which included that of equipping students with knowledge and skills "to contribute to the social upliftment of their families and community, by creating sustainable employment for themselves" (Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education, 2001, p.1). This was even more evident in the 2002 and 2003 reports which stated LETCEE's overall goal as "to increase the capacity of individuals and communities to provide

appropriate early childhood interventions”. This encompassed more specific aims of, among others:

- Developing skills and building the capacity of individuals
- Advocating the improvement of conditions of young children
- Working in partnerships with organisations working with children in their communities (Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education, 2002, p.1; 2003, p.1).

These statements are replete with the “second generation” discourse of community development: “building capacity”; “working in partnerships”; “working in communities”; “sustainable employment”. This shift was crucially informed and developed by LETCEE’s involvement in the *Izingane Zethu* project.

In 2002 LETCEE, as part of the KZN ECD consortium, became part of an ongoing *Izingane Zethu* (Our Children) project funded by the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund. The primary aim of the project is to improve the quality of life of young children infected or affected by HIV/AIDS. LETCEE’s major role within the consortium is to facilitate early education within the family setting for children who are not able to attend pre-school because of illness or poverty. This project involves building awareness and capacity within poor rural communities in the Kranskop area, including Ntunjambili, around early education. Twenty family facilitators, trained and supported by LETCEE, visit young children identified as vulnerable in the community, particularly those affected by HIV/AIDS. The family facilitators work with caregivers and the wider community to create conditions conducive for healthy child development (Kohne, 2004).

LETCEE’s experience of working intensively in a poverty-stricken rural area has had a powerful personal impact on staff members and further developed their understanding of the developmental context of ECD. Work has extended beyond visits to assisting local people to interact with government departments and facilitating access to government services:

LETCEE has worked closely with CINDI [Children in Need and Distress] and various government departments to facilitate the registration of births of the children so that childcare grants may be accessed (Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education, 2002, p.4).

The *Izingane Zethu* project also includes components such as developing food sources through gardening, protecting water sources, improving sanitation and building the capacity of community structures. These components are run by other consortium members in close collaboration with LETCEE. The project falls clearly into Korten's "second generation" orientation towards development with its focus on small-scale, local development aiming at self-reliance. It also has "third generation" components in engaging with government departments, insisting on implementation of existing welfare policies to the poor and facilitating access to these services. Here LETCEE and consortium members play an intermediary role in development, interacting closely with the Departments of Health, Home Affairs and Social Development. However, the project is potentially subject to "second generation" limitations such as a dependence of foreign funding and on the NGO as initiator within the local community, with no guarantee that initiatives will continue when the NGOs leave.

While LETCEE's trajectory as an organisation has become increasingly bound up with implementation of government policy through, for example, participation in the Grade R pilot project, the formalization of the training curriculum and the provision of ECD learnerships on behalf of government departments and agencies, there is another countervailing trajectory. This concerns LETCEE's learning as an organisation, through support visits, parents' meetings, community education and the *Izingane Zethu* project, about the relation between ECD and community development. LETCEE's experience points to the vital importance of community-based support and provision, especially for vulnerable children who are not able to access government services.

This article concludes with a discussion of the challenges faced by LETCEE and other ECD organisations in relation to ECD policy and implementation.

LETCEE and the shifting ECD policy terrain

In 2001 the government finally brought out an *Education White Paper (5) on Early Childhood Development* (Department of Education, 2001). This puts forward the establishment of a national system of Reception Year for 5-year-

olds based in primary schools with a small community-based component. The legislation says very little about 0–4-year-olds, for whom responsibility is shifted to Department of Social Development. Subsidy to schools takes place via a direct grant-in-aid from provincial departments of education to school governing bodies (SGBs) at the rate of 70 per cent of what it costs for a Grade 1 child.

Porteus (2004, p.363) suggests that “the current strategy for ECD development may not be oriented to confront the inequities inherited from our past, and may serve to further entrench them”. In particular the institutionalization of ECD within schools through Grade R for 5-year-olds places community-based provision, which constituted 72 per cent of ECD provision in 2001 according to the National Audit, in jeopardy. LETCEE’s experience in the Greytown and Tugela Valley areas of Tugela Ferry and Ntunjambili, confirmed by the experience of Training and Resources in Early Education (TREE) elsewhere in the province, is that parents opt to send their 5-year-olds to Grade R at schools because it is cheaper and includes a free meal a day, rather than to community-based sites, which are not subsidised. There are also reports of underage children attending these schools and forgery of birth certificates to get children in. Grade R classes are in some cases overcrowded and include a range of ages. They are also often further away from children’s homes than community-based sites, and this subjects small children to the risks and expenses of transport. Schools benefit in terms of funding and staff allocations from increased Grade R numbers, but the conditions around Grade R classes are not necessarily in the best interests of the children or of the ECD field more broadly. There is an exodus of 5-year-old and other children from community-based ECD sites, many of which become unviable and have to close down, leaving 0–4-year-olds outside any system of provision. In addition, Grade R teachers are generally not drawn from the cadre of NGO-trained ECD educators, but from redeployed school teachers who have no ECD training and treat Grade R as a “watered down Grade 1” (James, 2004; Picken, 2004).

LETCEE’s engagement with provision of educator training and Grade R on behalf of the state, on the one hand, and ECD community development initiatives such as *Izingane Zethu*, on the other, entails an involvement with contrasting models and philosophies of ECD provision (Porteus, 2004). This raises questions about the theory of development that underpins LETCEE’s activities. The shift evident in LETCEE’s vision and aims suggests the adoption of a community development model of ECD underpinned by a

rights-based discourse, although this does not necessarily encompass all of its activities. This model, however, has implications for LETCEE's sustainability, both in terms of financial security and in terms of legitimacy among beneficiary communities.

Tandon (2001) identifies sustainability as one of the key dilemmas facing NGOs in the new millennium. He argues that NGOs' dependence on funding from traditional development-aid sources

is making NGOs become service providers in a restricted and narrow sense, so depriving them of their ability to maintain autonomous, independent perspectives and positions on a wide range of socio-political and economic issues. As NGOs become more involved in large-scale service delivery and/or become more reliant on official funding, one might expect some fall-out in their flexibility, speed of response, and ability to innovate. . . How does one maintain a sustainable economic base, a material base, which allows NGOs flexible funds and yet keeps them accountable to the society and the community in which they live, work and practise? (Tandon, 2001, p.57).

LETCEE, like other ECD NGOs, balances on a tight rope strung between the poles of government and community. On the one hand, the governmental policy of formalization, regulation and incorporation of ECD into the education system means that NGOs become government service providers with an uncertain future. For example, the government's moves to provide ECD training at Further Education and Training colleges threatens to close the space presently occupied by NGOs, and the Department of Education's failure to recognise NGO-trained level 4 ECD practitioners for Grade R provision in schools undermines the credibility of NGO training. NGO dependence on official funding through tenders and grants makes it more difficult for them to exercise an independent critical voice. On the other hand, NGOs are acutely aware of the needs within communities for ECD provision and support, particularly in the 0–4 year age group which is not catered for by Grade R and among vulnerable children, such as those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS. However, the status of funding for ECD activities outside of state provision is precarious as funders refocus on other needs and foreign donors prioritize other parts of the globe.

In the light of this, there appears to be an important role for NGOs with direct experience of what is happening on the ground to challenge government policy and to advocate for a strengthening of community-based provision within an integrated system which utilises the capabilities of both civil society

and state formations. This would correspond with a shift to third generation and even fourth generation orientations, according to Korten's schema. Whether NGOs can play this critical role, given their increasing dependence on government tenders for survival and their incorporation into bureaucratic systems of state regulation, is open to question.

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