



**Africa A+
Schools**

Engaging Curious Minds
South Africa

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Malungeni Baseline report



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Africa A+ Schools

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INTRODUCTION

This report arises from work that was started in 2021 in the Malungeni district where Africa A+ Schools (henceforth known as A+) was invited to work with local Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers to upskill them in delivering quality teaching and learning programmes. Malungeni village which is a rural area in the Eastern Cape, was the focus of this study with a specific emphasis on the Ngqeleni magisterial district. An initial workshop was held from 25th to 28th October 2021, to begin to understand the context and community, where after it was agreed that 30 schools would be chosen to begin a three year journey of upskilling in collaboration with A+.

The baseline study took place from 17th to 25th February 2022 and was coupled with A+ training. This report addresses what was found and serves the purpose of benchmarking the current situation with a view to evaluating the progress that will take place over the three year programme of implementation.

CONTEXT

Education in South Africa has been in a state of crisis for more than 30 years (Fleisch, 2011, Amnesty International, 2020, Hardman & Veary, 2021). Unfortunately the crisis is at its worst in our most impoverished areas. This includes areas such as ¹Malungeni where it is largely a rural community hampered by lack of water, electricity, internet, infrastructural constraints, lack of DSD subsidy and unemployment leading to challenges around access to food and quality of life. Through the sterling work of Dr Spiwo Xapile, infrastructure has been put in place, a feeding scheme, schools built and communities uplifted. With the development of the Malungeni communities, has come a need to invest in the ECD sector providing quality foundational education. Of the 22 schools that were visited most were established in the 1990s with the most recent started in 2021. Below is a table illustrating the 5 schools sampled in-depth and their respective districts:

Name of School	Address
Ngqeleni Village School	Extension 4, PO Box 25, Ngqeleni, 5140
Botani Pre-School	Bolotwa Loc, Zixholosini A/A, 5140
Mtengwane Pre-School	Mposane Loc, Mbang A/A
Mdeni Pre-School	Mncane Loc, Zixholosini A/A
Libhongo Pre-School	Malungeni A/A

Table 1: The 5 schools sampled as schools of possible best practice and for development of facilitators.

¹ See Case Studies 1 & 2 on following pages for examples of challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This baseline study adopted an Action Research approach which allows the researcher to adapt to challenges and contexts in which they find themselves and work collaboratively with participants to solve them (Stringer, E.T. & Ortiz Aragon, A. 2022). The October 2021 visit already flagged that internet access and electricity may be problematic hence the field researchers made use of hardcopy surveys together with a google form that could be completed after hours or on return to Cape Town.

A key adaptation that was made was realizing that not all 22 schools had sufficient staff and infrastructure to adopt the traditional 'whole school approach' and therefore we needed to identify the top five schools that had a reasonable staff compliment and level of programme delivery. The five chosen schools additionally formed part of the local ECD forum. ECD fora are in South African contexts, relatively high functioning ECD centres that support other lower functioning centres in order to enable collaborative improvements. These communities of practice have the potential to make a substantial difference in the sector and often provide a mentorship role within challenging contexts (E. & B. Wenger-Traynor, 2015). For this reason, A+ decided to use the five chosen schools as a means of developing A+ facilitators who will work alongside the less functioning schools thereby assisting them to adopt the A+ principles. This means that there are embedded mentors who can continue the work of A+ outside of contact times.

Five of the 22 schools were visited and an observation of the school, together with photos and completing the survey, allowed the field workers to establish certain baseline information. All 22 schools completed a general survey that provided fundamental information around the school set up. The 5 sampled schools were observed in terms of the programme offerings and quality of teaching and learning. This report will deal with a combination of the data sets from three different surveys.

Registration

Up until recently the Department of Social Development (DSD) was the government entity that managed the registration of schools in the ECD sector. They are as of April 2022, moving this function to that of the Department of Basic Education (DBE). To date the DSD has failed to provide the type of support required by the ECD sector most recently not paying out millions of rands worth of funds that were ear-marked for relief over the pandemic. It is not uncommon for schools to not receive the subsidies that they are eligible for and for the ECD centres to have to call on communities to help feed their learners. The subsidy is meant to provide funds for a meal a day per learner as well as a very basic salary for a Principal and or teacher (Atmore, S., 2021). Note that all the sampled schools in fact provide breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack. This is because for many of the learners this is the only meal they would receive in a day.

Staff frequently go months without any salary as the parents are also on the breadline and unable to pay nominal fees (see case study 1). This has an impact on the quality of teaching and learning in the ECD centres as it is difficult for teachers and Principals to stay motivated when they do not receive a living wage. Some of the schools that were sampled indicated that they received support from local church groups and parents when possible.

Case Study 1.

The centre has been registered with DSD since 2016 but **no subsidy has been received**. Nombasa is a very resourceful teacher and takes initiative in making her own learning materials, implementing what she has learned, as well as taking children on outings and seeking colleague's advice and support. She has created a flip-file for each child showing their drawings and other activities. **She has no qualification and earns no stipend or salary**. She is busy with fundraising for a new building as they are currently operating from a church.

Case Study 2.

She is registered but receives **no subsidy from Social Development**. She is the chairperson of the ECD forum and is dedicated and committed to her ECD community. She is very concerned about the children with no birth certificates not having access to school. Facilitators observed that the classroom is not waterproof and there is evidence of black mould on the walls

In order to obtain the erratic DSD subsidy the ECD centre has to complete considerable documentation which is usually in English (not Home Language) and meet a range of health and safety criteria (see case study 2). The intention is to try and improve the conditions of teaching and learning but what it does not address is the reality of ECD centres in the impoverished rural communities. Many of the ECD centres are unable to register owing to not meeting the DSD criteria, struggle to complete the paper work attached to the application and also may not be able to afford a proper brick and mortar structure within their setting. What is evident from the above two case studies is the resilience that the teachers demonstrate despite their challenging circumstances.

Of the 22 schools that were sampled 72% are presently stating that they are registered and 27% do not yet receive any government support. This conflicts with the data gathered on the form that asked about what help was required and 19 of the 22 schools indicated that they needed help with registration.

Recommendation

1. **A+ will investigate how they can support the remaining 27% in achieving registration and also why the others within the 72% ratio are also requesting help.**

Qualifications and Staffing

Quality teaching and learning requires that staff have a reasonable level of qualification and sufficient staff per child ratio. For this reason one of the questions asked in the survey was what was the highest qualification obtained by Principals and Teachers and followed up with a question about the number of staff per centre and child numbers.

Below is a table illustrating this information:

Staffing	Qualification	Number of learners
16 Principals	Highest qualification = NQF Level 4 (9) Lowest qualification = Grade 7 (2)	Class size ranges from 20 learners to 89 and ranges in age from 3 months to 6 years.
9 Teachers only without a Principal	Highest qualification = NQF Level 4 (2) Lowest qualification = Grade 8 (2)	
14 assistants	Highest qualification = Matric Lowest qualification = Grade 8	
7 cleaners/cooks	Many ECD centres combine the cleaner and the cook as this saves on cost.	
4 volunteers		
1 school with 5 staff		

Table 2: Human resources

What is evident from the above table is that the qualification level is low and that more upskilling is required.

Recommendation

- All staff must receive upskilling that is practically based and will assist them in understanding how to deliver a quality ECD programme.**

Infrastructure

The type of building that houses an ECD centre, can have an impact on the quality of teaching and learning. We use the word 'can' as we are equally aware that good teaching and learning can take place under a tree or in the most basic structure. What is evident however is that the lack of a proper physical structure will not be sustainable owing to weather constraints. As already indicated, providing a brick and mortar structure is also a requirement of the DSD and therefore it is important that the ECD centres be properly equipped. Below is a table of the types of structures that the 22 schools displayed:

Type of structure	Number of schools
Bricks and mortar	9
Wendy house	2
Mud hut	3
Corrugated Iron/informal structure	3
Container	4
unfinished	1

Table 3: Infrastructure

What is promising is that just short of 50% of the sampled schools have brick and mortar structures. These may be church buildings or municipal buildings which does not guarantee that they are in good condition. With the exception of the Container schools, the other structures (Wendy houses, corrugated Iron, mud-huts) would not be considered acceptable by the DSD and would be problematic in terms of registration.



Figure 1 Container ECD Centre next to bricks and mortar. Note use of tyres for playground equipment.



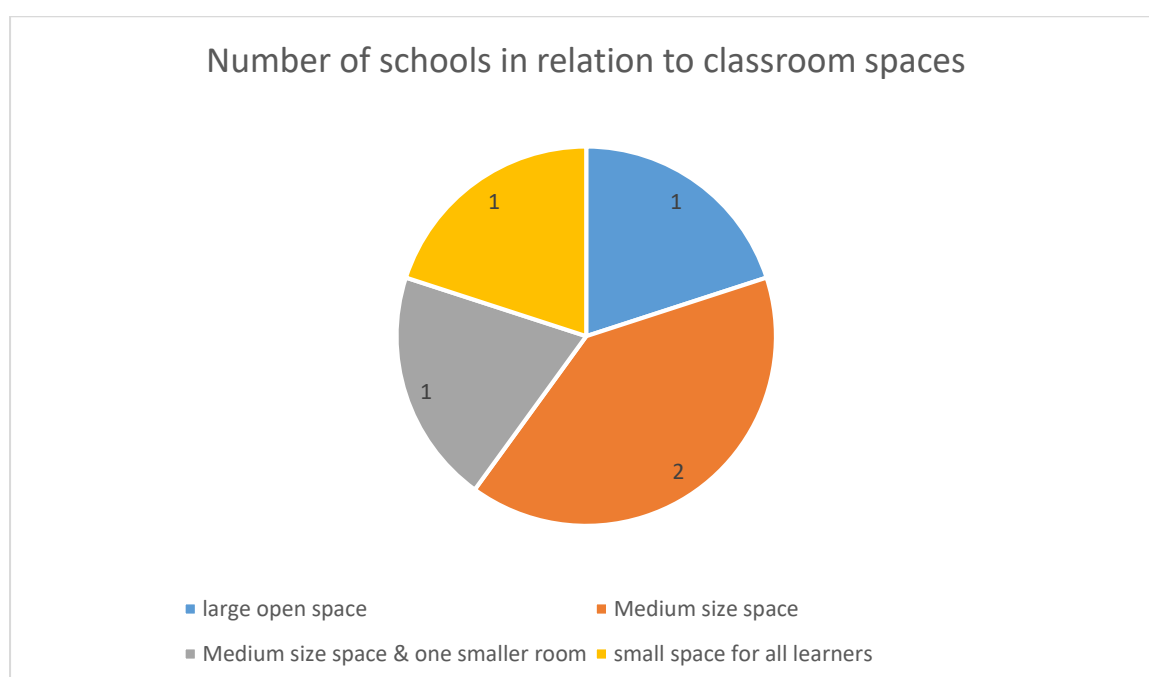
Figure 2 Outside Botani ECD school. Note the illustrations on the wall but base of building is losing plaster therefore subject to damp.

Recommendation

- 3. The upgrading of infrastructure is outside the scope of A+ work but assisting teachers to work within the limitations of their respective contexts will be a valuable contribution to achieving quality ECD.**

Number of Classrooms and teacher ratio

The amount of space at the disposal of a teacher can enable or constrain teaching and learning. For example if a teacher has a high number of learners and limited space they are not easily going to be able to have free play and role play within their classroom. This means adapting play-based programmes or working outdoors. The latter may not be conducive to free play owing to safety issues, amount of space and weather. It is particularly important in the foundation years for children to use their whole bodies and to learn through social collaborative play (Vygotsky, 1978). This requires space and the conscious mediation of that space. Furthermore limited space can result in the teacher having to mix age groups. This is not necessarily a negative thing as we know that younger children learn from their older peers. It may however be negative if the younger children require intense care owing to their being in the birth to 2 years age group resulting in the teacher expending excessive time on one age group over another. Here the teacher must be mindful of the different needs of their learners and also use the opportunity to teach each age group how to respectfully and safely interact. Below is a pie chart showing the space allocations across the 5 schools that were sampled in more detail.



Graph 1: Illustration of space distribution for teaching and learning across top 5 schools.

When we add the teacher to learner ratio in relation to the available space, we can begin to get a fuller picture of the challenges faced that may impact on teaching and learning.

Type of space	Available staff	Number of learners
Large open space	1	20
Medium space	2	22
Medium space & smaller room for younger learners	2	17

Small space for all learners	3	44
Medium space	3	85

Table 4: Types of learning space.

What is evident from the above table is that the school with the highest number of learners (85) only has a medium space with a mixture of learners of different ages. There is also concern that only three staff are available to manage 85 learners giving a ratio of 1:26. This will inevitably mean that the standard of care is compromised given that the official ratio should be 1:7. The *small space for all learners* has 44 learners and 3 staff giving a ratio of 1:14. This classroom size is not adequate for playful learning and would be a disincentive for teachers to set up activities that may require physical role play or could be messy. It is this type of scenario that often leads to teachers adopting a worksheet based approach to teaching and learning or keeping children sitting on chairs instead of learning through play. Worksheets don't require much space and are not messy but they do not belong in an ECD classroom as they do not promote playful, concrete based learning.



Figure 3 Large open space for learning.



Figure 4 Making the most of a challenging space.

The above image (Figure 4) shows issues with damp and limited space. We can see however how the teacher has adapted to the different challenges. She has put toys on a wall trolley and in a crate. This provides the learners with a designated place to put particular toys and it is easily movable if she needs the extra space. She has also confined her house corner to a freestanding house that contains the space for role play. I note also the aprons on the carpet ready for a messy activity. The learners know that they are going to have fun but she is also teaching them about how to respect their bodies and their environment. Furthermore, she has attempted to create a print-rich environment by putting posters on the walls together with labels. These strategies make the classroom visually stimulating, promote language development and suggest a teacher who understands how to make a challenging space inviting. It is this type of insight that is desirable in an A+ facilitator embedded in the community and able to model to other teachers how to produce quality ECD irrespective of challenging circumstances.

Recommendation

- 4. A+ will be identifying teachers who show both resilience and creative problem solving thinking and can therefore be trained as a community based facilitator. This type of facilitator will ensure sustainability of learning, ongoing mentorship and community based contextual support.**

Resources

Having sufficient resources to enable teaching and learning is often a trial in impoverished rural communities. There is insufficient capital to buy resources and it may simply be a case of not being near an economic hub to access resources. For this reason A+ puts considerable effort into assisting teachers to generate their own resources using recyclable materials. There are however key types of equipment that cannot be made using recyclable materials. For example chairs and tables, mats

for the floor and outdoor apparatus. A survey of the 22 schools revealed that 70% required outdoor equipment while 80% flagged that they had less than 5 types of indoor teaching resources. It should be noted that providing resources does not automatically lead to teaching as it is what the teacher does with the resource that is key.

Recommendations

- 5. It is recommended that if resources are provided that the teachers also receive training on how to use that resource coupled with adopting an asset based approach. By this we mean a combination of using resources available as 'loose parts' and setting up Communities of Practice for the sharing of resources. Providing large scale items such as outdoor play equipment/jungle gyms are outside the scope of the A+ work but A+ can provide alternative ways of ensuring playful-learning.**

Health and safety

Providing a safe clean environment for teaching and learning is essential to quality ECD. This requires a number of things to be in place. Firstly there should be sufficient space to allow for easy maintenance and cleaning. We are already aware that this is not always the case and that in one school there is potentially some black mould. Secondly there needs to be sufficient infrastructure to support teaching children hygienic habits. For this there is a need for water and for reasonable bathroom facilities. What was seen was a lack of water and often outside long-drop toilets that can compromise a child's safety. 33% of the 22 sampled schools reported that they would like water tanks to be installed so that they can benefit from rain water. 16 out of the 22 schools reported that their ECD centres were securely enclosed thereby providing peace of mind for parents who drop off their children for the day



Figure 5 outdoor toilets and potties.



Figure 6 kitchen showing cooking and cleaning method.

In the above figure 6 we can see that everything is very clean and tidy with the staff using a basin to wash up in order to conserve water. Generally this supports the fact that the survey evidence that 60% of the schools were considered safe clean environments despite the obvious challenges of poor infrastructure and lack of power or water. The safety aspect of having a hot pot in the middle of the kitchen floor however, is concerning as is the 40% of schools that were not considered safe.

Recommendation

- 6. All 22 schools would need to be visited to ensure that they have secure premises. This would also include establishing who has first aid training and a first aid kit, who has a fire extinguisher and knows how to use it and if harmful cleaning materials are being kept out of reach of children. The A+ team would need to advise Principals and teachers on why safety is important, discuss ways of improving safety on the premises and assist Principals with fund-raising strategies to garner support where needed.**

Teaching and learning evidence

This section will unpack what evidence was found to support existing teaching and learning strategies and where the gaps reside. It will provide information from the overall 22 surveyed schools together with more detailed information from the 5 schools that were the recipients of a site visit. Keeping in mind the qualifications of the teachers many of whom have an NQF level 4 (50%), it could be assumed that they know the fundamentals of ECD and how to provide age appropriate activities.

Planning for teaching and learning

One of the key documents that all teachers need to not only access but familiarize themselves with, is the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). This policy document guides the teacher in what the child should learn, how, when and why. The survey revealed that 86% of the 22 schools did not use or have access to the NCS. When looking in more detail at the 5 model schools that were sampled, there was 100% lack of evidence of the NCS or the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) either in hardcopy, electronic or in terms of what was being demonstrated in the classroom.

Recommendation

- 7. This suggests that the teachers are not understanding the importance of policy translated into practice and will require guidance in this regard.**

When asked how the teachers plan for the activities in the classroom, 9 of the 22 schools responded that they use the daily programme and 81% said they had it displayed on their wall in the classroom. 60% of the 5 sampled schools had a daily programme on display but had limited evidence of following it. Whilst the daily programme is a tool for itemizing the routine of the day, it is not meant as a primary planning tool.

Recommendation

- 8. This suggests that understanding the planning of activities, how to plan, the importance of planning and what to plan that is age appropriate, is an area that will require attention.**

The 5 sampled schools evidenced that 80% of the teachers did not plan in any formal way using any type of official documents or written documentation. 20% made informal notes when prepping for the week ahead. This means that in most instances the teachers are primarily performing a

'babysitting' role and not one that will maximize the potential of the learners in the crucial first 1000 days (UNICEF, 2017).

Assessment

Assessment in the early years should largely be based on observation rather than tests as the child is deemed too young to sit and write a test. This means that the teacher should have a way of keeping a record of what they observe and should have detailed notes on each area they have observed. Samples of a learner's art can be kept in a Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) so that the teacher can provide evidence should this become necessary. A PoE should not however contain worksheets as this is too formal and inappropriate for the age group.

An analysis of 5 schools showed that 50% of the schools had no evidence of any kind of assessment and 50% had PoEs. Only a couple of PoEs were examined during the site visits and this was primarily an A4 flip-file containing pieces of art such as self-portraits or collages. None of the schools showed any evidence of integrating assessment into teaching and learning. Most schools provided the parents with a bi-annual report with one school using this as a tool to encourage parents to pay fees. If the parents paid fees they could attend a graduation ceremony and receive their child's report.

Given that in the previous section there was limited evidence of any planning it therefore makes sense that there would equally be little evidence of assessment. Planning includes what is to be assessed and should align to the curriculum requirements. This is supported by playful learning activities that facilitate the child acquiring new knowledge (Brodie, 2013).

Recommendation

9. **Understanding how to assess, why we assess and providing relevant evidence will be an area that needs to be addressed.**

Type of activity

What happens in the classroom makes the difference between active learning and stagnation (Harrison, 2014). There is a deep concern in South African ECD environments that 'schoolification' is taking place (Bipath & Theron, 2020). By this we mean that emphasis is placed on preparing the learners for Grade One by rote learning the days of the week, names of months, symbols associated with reading and writing etc, none of which are age appropriate tasks. This prevents the learner from developing conceptual understanding using concrete objects but rather immediately embraces the abstract which is not age appropriate in the birth to 5 year age group. Given that 50% of the teachers that were sampled have an NQF Level 4 training, it is concerning that they are not aware of this problem. The field workers did encounter a certain amount of chanting of days of the week and names of months along with a sense from the teachers that this would help upskill the children for Grade One.

We have already established that planning was not really evident in most of the 22 schools that were sampled and that infrastructure was potentially an issue. Observation by the field workers further revealed that teachers were tending to manage the learners by placing them on chairs for extended periods of time. This was not isolated to smaller spaces where movement may have been problematic but was also seen in one of the biggest learning spaces available. Again this is demonstrating a lack of understanding about age appropriate activities and playful learning. In addition although some schools are relatively well resourced they are afraid to put out the toys and learning materials, for fear of creating chaos and children potentially breaking the equipment. Toys are therefore placed out of reach of the child or simply not packed out at all. One of the key aspects of quality ECD is that of experiential playful learning. If the learner is to be able to experience

learning they must be able to handle resources, physically move around and move from the concrete to the abstract. During the recent workshop in Malungeni, the facilitators consciously adopted a strategy of putting out an interactive activity during workshop time so that teachers could see the types of activities they could do with their learners and actively try it out for themselves. This is a strategy that will be continued in further workshops.

Recommendation

10. **We therefore make another recommendation that the teachers need to be supported in understanding that part of their job is to allow for experiential learning, teach children how to respect resources and support multiple opportunities for physical movement. For teachers to achieve this they must understand what is meant by age appropriate play-based learning. For this reason the A+ Facilitators will continue to provide experiential learning at the workshops and model play-based learning that is age appropriate.**

Case Study 3.

When the team presented a session on the importance of the NCS and how to use it, one teacher revealed that she had been trying to teach her learners counting numbers, alphabet symbols, names of months, days of the week etc and they had really struggled. She now understood why and felt bad that she had given them such a difficult time. The A+ training had helped her to understand what she should do and why.



Figure 7 Sitting on chairs

Note the children in figure 7 are struggling to sit still as it is not physically comfortable for them to do so at this age.

Classroom environment/set up

The way in which a classroom is configured is part of ECD (CAPS, 2011). The curriculum suggests designated areas of learning and a print-rich environment to stimulate learning (CAPS, 2011). In addition, the classroom should have sufficient space for music and movement, block construction and a designated area for experiential art activities.

The table below illustrates what the teachers have indicated as available classroom set up. This would need to be confirmed with further site visits.

Type of learning area	Number of schools indicating availability
Fantasy corner	20
Reading corner	17
Block construction	16
Art corner	16

Table 5. Types of learning areas

The field observers noted that very few of the five schools had any kind of clearly designated areas of learning and in fact most had packed away toys beyond the reach of the learner. Earlier sections of this report do indicate that there are some constraints linked to lack of space and resources but even in schools that have both, there is no proper evidence of the concept of learning areas.

Recommendations

- 11. Time must be spent on how to set up learning areas irrespective of context and why doing this is so important to the child's development.**

Displaying learner's work

One of the primary ways in which we validate learners is to proudly display their artwork on the classroom walls. This serves a number of purposes. Firstly it enhances the learning environment, secondly it stimulates the visual learner and thirdly it builds the child's sense of self-worth because it allows the child to see that their work is appreciated and worthy. Lastly it informs the parent that learning has taken place and can open up the opportunity between parent and teacher to discuss the learner's work.

63% of the 22 schools indicated that they had learner artwork on display. The five schools that were visited did not evidence much learner work on the wall but it was positive to see that it was not worksheets, rather drawings and some collage art on the walls.

When establishing a print-rich classroom that promotes reading and writing the teacher can make use of the learner's art to label colours, shapes and objects. It is these types of strategies that need to be demonstrated to the teachers.

Recommendations

- 12. Teachers need to be supported in understanding how to display art work, discuss art with learners to encourage language development, how to discuss learner's work with parents and to consider using paper that is larger than A4.**

Parent engagement

Children do not exist in isolation. It has long been acknowledged that the teacher should work in collaboration with the parent to develop the holistic child (Harrison, 2019). This means that the teacher must know how to engage the parent in their child's learning, the parent needs to know how to communicate with the teacher and the child and together they must provide the child with a strong consistent message of support. For this reason our survey examined parental involvement at the ECD centres.

Of the 5 in-depth sampled schools there was no evidence of teachers interacting with parents. This may be as a result of the time of observation or could be that teachers do not encourage this type of interaction. When asked where these schools get support one reported that the parents were very supportive and helped with providing resources and fund-raising for the school.

When asked to explain how the school works with parents to improve the school, most reported that they communicate regularly via whatsapp or message books whilst one responded that they like to keep parents updated about what is happening at the school. Another responded as follows, *'Concerned about parents' lack of interest in the development of their children. The people from our community are very poor'*. This suggests that there is a combination of some support from parents with a concern that there is too little to none at all.

Recommendation

- 13. The recommendation in this regard is therefore to provide the teachers with the tools to draw the parents into their classrooms and to communicate effectively with the parents despite the difficult contexts.**

Identifying needs

Across the different surveys the teachers were asked to indicate areas of need. The table below indicates the needs according to the teachers and Principals. It is essential to not only look at what was found through the survey and observations but to also hear the voice of the teacher who is talking to the gaps that they perceive.

Type of need	Number of schools
Registration	19
Planning	18
Setting up the classroom environment	17
Implementing the curriculum	18

Table 6: Needs identified by teachers

What is useful to note in the above table is that the majority of the schools have validated the areas that the field observers noted as being problematic. This means that the attitude of the teachers will align with the work that A+ will do to support them.

Recommendation

- 14. Four key issues have been identified as areas of focus. A+ will within the constraints of budget and time, address these issues.**

Conclusion

This baseline assessment has outlined an ECD community that is working hard to overcome challenges and to provide quality teaching and learning within their classrooms. The gaps in knowledge are ones that can be addressed with a combination of regular contact, workshops and experiential learning over a three year period. A+ will work collaboratively with this community to provide practical support irrespective of constraints, to enable teachers, parents and learners to collectively raise their children. By providing a quality ECD experience for each learner, we establish a foundation of learning that will carry the child forward into their formal education environment.

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