



Africa A+ Schools

Annual Report: 2023



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From the Director

A number of recent publications have highlighted the great need to improve the quality of teaching and learning in South African early childhood education (ECE). The *Thrive by Five Index* (2022; www.thrivebyfive.co.za) states that only 35% of children entering Grade 1 are ready for school, which means that two-thirds of our five-year olds are not succeeding in the important preparation year of Grade R. In addition, only 33% of ECE centres receive a government subsidy, 60% of ECE centres are not registered, and approximately 50% of their staff are under-qualified.

A recent UNESCO publication entitled, *Sankofa: appreciating the past in planning the future of early childhood education care and development in Africa* (2023), established that, despite Africa having a high proportion of children included in formal ECE systems, little is said or done about the challenges faced. The book examines long-standing concerns and inequities regarding missing voices, data and knowledge from the developing world. *Africa A+ Schools (A+)* addresses this concern by straddling the NGO and academic sectors, meaning that much of our work translates academic theory into teaching practice and pedagogy in our teacher-training programmes.

A+ has had a dynamic year with new programmes added to our portfolio, and publications and conference presentations that disseminated our **A+** approach widely. Our practical, asset-based use of loose parts is evolving with a move of our **A+ iZinto** depot in Cape Town to an affiliation with the *Centre for Creative Education* (CCE), and potentially a new depot in Makhanda.

Our **A+** trainers have worked intensely to build capacity and skill among in-service ECE practitioners in Eastern, Northern and Western Cape. They have provided many quality opportunities to participate in practical learning that promotes creativity and problem solving. We are proud that our impact and reach have grown substantially in 2023 (as they also did in 2022; see below).

Provinces in which A+ was active in 2023	3 provinces (Western, Eastern and Northern Cape)	Relative to 2022: 50% increase
Number of projects undertaken in 2023	7 (3 teacher-training projects, 3 teaching-materials projects and 1 “maintenance” project.)	Relative to 2022: 40% increase
Number of ECE centres involved in training	40 in Kouga, 30 in Malungeni and 12 in Kathu. Total of 82 centres/schools.	Relative to 2022: 17% increase.
Number of teachers/staff trained in 2023	120 in Kouga, 55 in Malungeni and 24 in Kathu. Total of 199 teachers and centre staff.	Relative to 2022: 14% increase
Parents at parent workshops in 2023 (n.a. in Kouga)	45 in Malungeni, 78 in Kathu. Total of 123 parents.	Relative to 2022: Approx. 173% increase.
Number of children impacted in 2023	Approximately 1425 in Kouga, 1138 in Malungeni and 328 in Kathu. Total of 2891 children.	Relative to 2022: Approx. 12% increase.
Number of parents influenced (@~1 per child)	Approximately 1400 in Kouga, 1100 in Malungeni and 300 in Kathu. Total of roughly 2800 parents.	Relative to 2022: Approx. 12% increase.

In ECE, we do not function in isolation because it is collaborative effort that makes the greatest difference. I gratefully acknowledge our collaborations with the *Centre for Early Childhood Development* (CECD) on two of our projects (Kouga and Kathu), with SARAEECE on conferencing and knowledge dissemination, and with Dr Spiwo Xapile of *The Platform* organization in our work in Malungeni. I also extend gratitude and thanks to our funders, who are listed at the end of this report.

2024 will present more exciting opportunities for **A+**. We will continue to make a positive difference in the lives of South African children and teachers.



Giulietta Harrison (PhD; Executive Director)

From the Chairman

We are proud to report another year of positive **A+** impacts in more South African schools. Despite challenging times with inflationary pressure on food, fuel and other necessities, as well as underfunding of the public school system and a shortage of trained school staff and teachers, wherever we go, **A+** contributes to creativity and enjoyable learning experiences for the children, teachers and parents of communities. When one works with people and builds trust over an extended period of time, as **A+** does, positive results are accumulative because people are engaged and they contribute their own creative energy.

A+ is starting to gain more traction within the professional ECE community in South Africa. We continue to develop and grow, as shown by the stats in our Director's report (previous page). This is testament to the value of our programmes, but also valuable for our brand and ability to recruit more project leaders and facilitators going forward. **A+** works actively to strengthen its base and increase its resources to take on new projects and spread creative learning to more schools and children throughout the country. Apart from project-specific funding, we are looking to broaden support through a new fund-raising programme which was recently initiated.

Educating our children is key to building a more resilient and successful future. We thank all our donors and sponsors, our fantastic staff, our local trainees, and everyone else supporting us. And most of all, thanks to the wonderful children that bring us so many smiles, laughter and love. We are here for them and they bring us the joy we need to keep going. They remind us that learning can be so much fun!



Thomas Petersson (MSc; Chairman of the Board)

From the Treasurer

It has been another successful year for **A+**. Over the past couple of years, the organisation has gone from a "start-up", with friends and family contributing assistance gratis, to a stable organisation with a proven model to bring positive change in education. We honour our humble beginnings, but overall, the structure of the organisation is now robust in terms of finances, accounting, reporting, and cash management. This means we can deliver on time, and within budget. We have also introduced a "four-eyes principle" in all of our financial transactions and reporting, further protecting the organisation and its funders. We provide regular project budget reports to our funders, as well as professional annual audits for the organisation as a whole. Cash management is strict and we follow up on budgets monthly to make sure we track progress, expenses and investments closely. **A+** is in a healthy state financially and we continue to add to our "rainy-day" reserve capital. We depend on the support of our funders, whom we warmly thank for their vital contribution to our country's ECE. Our funding currently comes mainly from windfarm and solar energy projects and their sponsors, as well as some traditional ECE funders, as well as a few "angel" donors (see acknowledgements at the end of this report). We thank all our supporters for bringing learning and joy to our country's children and their teachers.



Tania Nortje-Petersson (Treasurer)

From the Project Leaders

During 2023, Africa A+ Schools (A+) ran six separate projects. These were all at different stages in their progress with some having started prior to 2023, and others beginning during the course of the year. Each project has a Project Leader who is an A+ facilitator and is primarily responsible for planning and implementation of the project, assisted by one or two additional facilitators.

Kouga Project

The Kouga Windfarm Trust (KWT) ECE project in Eastern Cape swelled from 33 to 40 ECE centres in 2023. The children at the centres range from three months to six years and most live in poor communities of the Kouga District, in the towns of Humansdorp, Cape St Francis and Oyster Bay. The 40 ECE centres are divided into three cohorts to facilitate training and support. (Cohort Three in picture, below.)



We completed seven field trips to Kouga in 2023. The trips included professional development days, implementation workshops, support visits to individual ECE centres, with demonstrations by A+, and an annual survey that monitors progress at each centre.

In between field trips A+ provided online support to the ECE centres and local trainees using WhatsApp messaging and calls. A+ believes in sustainability and is training a team of local ECE facilitators to support the Kouga ECE centres after the project is concluded (see photo of local principals in training on next page). A high teacher turnover keeps an ECE centre at the entry level of training. Teachers at poor ECE centres are mostly untrained youth who leave for better opportunities. A+ initiated staff development workshops for the principals to counter this challenge of high teacher turnover.

There were several highlights in the year. The use of loose parts (recycled, found and discarded materials repurposed for teaching and learning) developed into a central element in **A+**'s approach. Our experience is that children and teachers learn best when they play and work with concrete objects (as opposed to intellectual theories alone). Loose parts also makes ecological and economic sense.



WhatsApp has evolved into a significant training and support tool that enables the sharing of pedagogical knowledge, as well as practical ideas on play-based learning, and guidance on integration with national curricula. **A+** shared their Kouga experience by presenting "*WhatsApp: a training tool that supports learning, implementation and community building*" at the *Quality Early Childhood Development in South Africa* conference in Cape Town in September 2023.



The Kouga trainee facilitation team's (photo above) first solo one-day training exceeded expectations. Participant Elbe noted afterwards, "*Everything was well-planned and exciting. This was not a waste of time but a very fruitful day. I learned a lot.*" And Annie said, '*They was very good*'.

The Kouga **A+** team looks forward to 2024. We have planned another seven field trips that focus on the arts, creativity, play-based teaching, and implementation of *quality* early education that will set the children of Kouga up for success.

Testimonials from Kouga educators are evidence of their enthusiasm for the **A+** approach to teaching and learning:

- *I love the way **A+** teaches us. It's perfect. Thumbs up.* (Mieta)
- *I used to think "That things that are used [loose parts] are rubbish and threw them away." But I now think "That it can be used in so many valuable ways. That it makes learning so much interesting."* (Meryl)
- *"How important even the first few months of their [children] lives are. And how big the impact can be we make on them from Day 1."* (Heidi)
- *I used to think "Teacher led classes was the way to go because that is how we were taught". But I now think "Giving learners the opportunity to explore and investigate for themselves encourages freedom of creativity leading to well-rounded adults"* (Nadine)
- *I used to think "teaching children is hard and draining." But I now think "teaching is more easy when everyone is happy and it's enjoyable."* (Babelwa)
- *I used to think "that children can be put in your box as a teacher and that is the way that you teach." But I now think " that all children are different and no one that think the same. We are all different and think and learn on different ways."* (Sunelle)
- *I used to think "I can't talk in front of people." But I now think "I'm confident enough."* (Eunice)

Western Cape maintenance project

In Western Cape, **A+** maintains supportive contact with trainees that were part of the very first **A+** workshops, back in the period 2015-2018. This is an expression of the **A+** policy of long-term support for the membership of its "**A+** family". This practice ensures that the benefits of training are carried forward and sustained.

A+ facilitated an NCF Curriculum Workshop on 4 July 2023. This is a testimonial from Aziza Ebrahim, chairperson of the LKRS ECD Forum EXCO in the Kenwyn/Rondebosch East/Athlone area of Cape Town:

"Without a doubt, the participants on both days, were blown away by your facilitation of the ELDA's. The consensus is that they have learnt more in one day, than the previous workshops they have attended!"

*"From LKRS ECD Forum, **heartfelt thank you** for making yourself available, for the great effort in setting up the Hall and the well-presented workshop. We hope we can utilise your facilitation skills again!!"*

Yours in quality education for all.

LKRS ECD Forum EXCO

Anya Morris (M.Ed.; Project Leader and facilitator,
and founder of **A+** in South Africa)

Anya is assisted by Yolande Delport (facilitator) and Carole Scott
(facilitator)



Malungeni Project

The Malungeni Project was initiated by Dr Spiwo Xapile and began officially in October 2021. Dr Xapile saw the need for strengthening of ECE in his community and surrounding areas. 2023 was A+’s second year working in the community. Malungeni is in the rural Ngqeleni District of Eastern Cape. It is surrounded by rolling hills scattered with homesteads and subsistence farms. The nearest small town is Ngqeleni. Some of the ECE centres in the area accept children from three months to five years of age, and some from two to five years. Most of the principals have an NQF level 4 qualification.

We planned a three-year intervention with four visits per year, but due to funding constraints we completed only four field trips up to October 2023. Despite this relatively low number of workshops, the enthusiasm from the teachers of Malungeni remains strong.

Malungeni pre-schools provide good care for their young children, yet function with minimal direction in fundamental principles of teaching and learning. A lack of resources adds to their problems. In 2023 we continued working with loose parts¹ which consistently amazed the participants because of the possibilities they offer for teaching and learning.

In Malungeni, on-site demonstrations are managed in a “fish-bowl” approach where teachers from surrounding areas are invited to observe lessons. After a lesson, teachers discuss what they observed with the facilitators. This experiential learning is very popular with the participants and

they often travel from far to come and observe A+ do an onsite demonstration.

A highlight was being able to demonstrate teaching using loose parts around the theme of “Sound”. After listening to a story called “Shhhh, Baby is Sleeping”, a collection of everyday materials and found objects were put in a suitcase for children to explore the concept of sound. The children were asked, “What sounds can



you make?” They were delighted to experiment with banging, blowing, tapping or scraping the various materials (see photo).

¹ “Loose parts” refers to found, natural and recycled materials. They are collected, curated and presented for enquiry, creative projects and as teaching and learning resources. They can be sourced at no cost and are used in many different ways in the classroom.

At another school housed in a rondawel, the teacher had adopted what she had learned about setting up the room from a previous workshop and had created stations such as loose parts play, building with found boxes, sand and painting. It was rewarding to see **A+** ideas being used in a practical way.

Another highlight of 2023 was a parent workshop where the focus was on play. Many of the parents brought their children to this workshop. It was wonderful to see the parents play with the loose parts themselves and then play with their children (see photo). Parents were able to see for themselves the value of using loose materials and how this type of play supports problem solving, critical thinking and creativity. Teachers have expressed the need to understand the NCF 0-4 curriculum together with working with loose parts and would like more opportunities to workshop these together.

One of the challenges faced by the **A+** facilitators is the difficulty navigating the rural dirt roads (see photo). These quickly turn to impassable mud after rain.



Longer breaks between field trips makes it more difficult to effect change. We compensate by using WhatsApp to check in, share ideas and offer support, but this is no match for workshops and physical interaction with teachers.

Language is another challenge, but using a translator, while slowing us down, provides a workable solution. It allows teachers to ask questions in their home language. The facilitators are also more confident that valuable information is not lost.

We have set our dates for four field trips in 2024. We look forward to consolidating the **A+** essentials with the teachers through fun and engaging activities. We also want to visit more schools that are part of the project to offer on-site support, as well as on-site demonstrations. A major focus of the **A+** work will be teaching effective planning using loose parts and the 0-4 NCF curriculum.

Empowering teachers to use their community to help with fund raising for equipment and supplies will also be addressed. Helping teachers organise their materials through playful sorting activities, planning classroom layout, and practising ways to make classroom organisation sustainable by teaching participants how to get children involved in the process, are also on the agenda.



Carole Scott (M.Ed.; Project Leader and facilitator)

Carole is assisted by **Yolande Delport** (facilitator)



Kathu Project

The Kathu Solar Park project (KSP) started in May 2023 and is a collaboration between the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD) and *Africa A+ Schools (A+)*. It comprises five project components. The participants are from 23 ECE centres based in Kathu, Kuruman and Olifantshoek, mostly rural and semi-urban areas. The ECE centres are divided into two cohorts. **A+** training uses a whole-school approach and includes all staff who work with children. The qualifications of the participants range from none to NQF Level 5.

The five project components are described below:

- 1) **Facilitator training:** **A+** trains eight Kathu facilitators to ensure continuity of implementation after the three years of the project. The facilitators are selected from among the participating ECE centres. The training supports both professional development and personal leadership skills.
- 2) **Facilitator mentoring and support:** The eight Kathu facilitators initially shadow the **A+** team during training workshops and on-site demonstrations until they are proficient in facilitating **A+** activities themselves.
- 3) **Training in the **A+** approach:** The training aims to connect teachers to their own creativity through the use of songs, poems, creative movement, painting and playing with loose parts. Teachers were very responsive (see photo).



Quote from a teacher participant: *"....we do less of art, so because I saw it's exciting, enjoyable, thinkable, (I) will have to implement more of it."* – Kealeboga Magobe.

- 4) **ECE Teacher Mentoring and support in the **A+** approach:** Mentoring and support takes place in the form of on-site visits. The **A+** team demonstrated creative learning activities with children (see photo), during the four on-site visits. Teachers from Kuruman, Olifantshoek and Kathu were invited to attend. 37 teachers attended the on-site demonstration and were active observers.
- 5) **Parent skills training:** Training took place in Communities 1 and 2, with two sessions in each. The training programme envisages reaching a total of 200 parents in the area.



Parents were introduced to the importance of play-based learning in early childhood development. Parents got hands-on experience of skills, such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity, during play activities set out for them (see photo below).

Quote from a parent: *"I learned about our children who are supposed to play every day because to play for them is to refresh their minds. I would like to learn more about children and I enjoy to attend this course, it was very successful and great and I enjoyed it very much."* – Elizabeth from Olifantshoek

A+ makes use of the WhatsApp platform for communication and online support, especially during the period between field trips. Google forms has become a useful tool for the eight facilitators in submitting their bi-weekly reports.

Formal school activities were observed at nearly all the ECE centres during on-site visits that took place in July 2023. There are deeply entrenched attitudes regarding teaching and learning of young children that need to be changed. **A+** hopes to have an influence on parents' view of ECE practitioners and the importance of ECE to their children. Changing mind-sets takes time, so **A+** is fortunate to have three years of training in which to bring about meaningful change.

A+ will complete year one of the three-year project in July 2024. The **A+** team is looking forward to 2024 and feels fortunate to be taking ECE training to some of the most remote centres in John Taolo Gaetsewe District. We commend Kathu Solar Park for this opportunity.



*June O'Neill (facilitator) and
Yolande Delport (Project Leader
and facilitator)*



A+ iZinto Materials Centre Project

One of the key aspects of **A+** work continues to be using found materials in creative activities. We call these materials “loose parts” which is a term widely used in education theory. Loose parts comprise a variety of objects, from plastic recyclables, old keys and tins to interesting discarded materials like old stock samples, large reels, cardboard tubes, etcetera. The very open-ended nature of these materials is what gives them value and makes them attractive. They are not fashioned into specific toys, but rather offer opportunities for creative exploration and play. Loose parts encourage children to insert their own imagination into their use.

We work extensively with these materials during workshops, demonstrating their versatility as a resource. They are no-cost materials that the community can help to source.

The **A+ iZinto Materials Centre (A+ iZinto)** originated in Cape Town in a storage facility funded by Richard Burnett, a Rotary member who was supportive of **A+**. A second facility was started in Humansdorp as part of the Kouga Project (see report above). The Kouga centre also received funding from an angel donor.

It was in Kouga that workshops could begin to incorporate the concept of loose parts into training as the space was large enough to host workshops, and teachers were able to see how the materials were organised and kept. Some aspects of the space were not ideal, however, so after the lease expired, a new storage facility was found and organised. At this stage the Kouga teachers are well trained in the use of loose parts, so the emphasis has shifted to encouraging teachers to create mini centres to service local communities of practice.

In Cape Town, **A+ iZinto** now operates from the Centre for Creative Education (CCE), a teachers’ college in Plumstead. This idea took hold after it was offered as a potential space to curate the materials at no cost. In turn, their students would learn about the potential of materials and loose parts as a resource for teaching and learning as it would become integrated into course work at the college. The **A+** workshops would also continue to benefit from **A+ iZinto’s** central location, as well as many of the local schools that work with **A+** and CCE.

The potential to take **A+ iZinto** further through community engagement with creative endeavours requires a consistent source of funding.

Carole Scott is Project Leader for **A+ iZinto** in Kouga and Cape Town, and **Yolande Delport** is Project Leader in Makhanda.



Short Courses Project

A+ has created a short (9 hours) course, accredited by the South African Council for Educators (SACE), for Preschool and Foundation Phase educators, titled *Multiple Intelligences in Early Education*. The course was developed by Anya Morris who also secured accreditation.

The course, which is available online or face to face, provides teachers with 90 professional development points. The course begins with Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences and ends with practical ways of implementing pedagogical diversity in the classroom.

A+ aims to create more SACE accredited courses. It is a challenging time for today's educators and we would like to share **A+**'s approach to creating joyful learning spaces for children and teachers. Accredited short courses are popular with teachers because, being accredited, they help to satisfy official requirements for in-service training.

The challenge in offering short courses is that most teachers require sponsorship to attend them, and **A+** staff need to be paid to give the courses, therefore funds need to be raised to make it all possible. Fundraising is a challenge that will receive a lot of attention in 2024.

Below: Trainee facilitators of Kathu in discussion. Multiple Intelligences is one of many concepts that **A+** introduces them to.



Funders, donors and collaborators

Africa A+ Schools (A+) enjoys moral, professional and financial support from a number of collaborators, funders and donors. We wish to express our sincere thanks and appreciation to all of these, listed below:

Collaborators:

- ❖ Centre for Early Childhood Development
- ❖ The Platform, through Dr Spiwo Xapile
- ❖ Centre for Creative Education
- ❖ Grow ECD

Funders:

- ❖ Kouga Windfarm Community Trust
- ❖ D.G. Murray Trust
- ❖ Kathu Solar Park
- ❖ The Platform
- ❖ Arms in Africa

Donors:

- ❖ Paul Steenkamp
- ❖ Anya Morris
- ❖ Carole Scott
- ❖ Anonymous Angel Donors

If you are interested in supporting the work of **A+**, please get in touch with the Executive Director, Dr Giulietta Harrison, at 072 959 8895 and harrisongiulietta@gmail.com

