

Africa A+ Schools

Newsletter #1

August 2025



Africa A+ Schools (A+) celebrates its **10th**

Anniversary this year – not a bad time to start a newsletter. (There was, in fact, an earlier **A+** newsletter that was discontinued – see the history article.) We decided to produce a newsletter because **A+** has good news to tell, and goodness knows we all need good news!

A+ is dedicated to making a contribution to the quality of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in South Africa. Our newsletter will highlight the *How* and *Where* and *Who* of our training of ECE teachers. It is often an inspiring story.

In this first issue, we highlight, by means of an interview, the work of Anya Morris who played a central role in establishing **A+** as an organization. Anya leaves **A+** this year. We would like to acknowledge her huge contribution to the work of **A+**.

The other item in this 10th Anniversary newsletter is a brief history of **A+**. It is appropriate to look back at where we have come from and what has been achieved in our first ten years. As someone who joined **A+** relatively recently, I have found it most interesting to discover the origins of **A+**. I hope you will too.

James Harrison – Editor

An Interview with Anya Morris

Anya Morris was the first Project Director of **Africa A+ Schools (A+)** and played a key role in the establishment of the organization and its approach to teacher training. After 10 years of dedicated service, Anya recently retired from **A+**. June O'Neill, an **A+** Senior Facilitator, interviewed Anya to gain her unique perspective on the early history of our organization and its work.



Anja, welcome to our interview. Let's begin with a little bit of background about yourself. What brought you into teaching and what has kept you in education for so many years?

It's a funny story. I was the eldest of four children. My mother was twice widowed and by the age of seven or eight I had three siblings. So I think I did a lot of looking after children. When I got to the end of matric, my parents decided that I would be a really good preschool teacher and they basically signed me up for Barkly House (Teachers' Training College). So that's how I started! I really have loved preschool teaching in all these years, working in areas that are less well-resourced and with children who are in need, more than anything else.

You had also worked with adults prior to A+. Can you tell me a little about that?

In 2007, after deciding I was getting a bit intolerant of the noise, and that preschool teaching was a really physical job and that I was getting older, I knew I needed to move somewhere else. Six months later I was accepted for the post of teacher trainer at ELRU (Early Learning Resource Unit), after having sought holiday volunteer work there. So that's how I moved from teaching children into teaching adults.

What was it that you learned from them?

ELRU was a very special place indeed. Run at the time by Frieda Brock, it was an amazing group of women. They were predominantly stalwarts; women who had been there since the organisation's inception, all through the struggle years. I was lucky enough to come in on the tail end of their careers. It was the first time that I was introduced to the theories of Paulo Freire and Lev Vygotsky, people I had never heard of while working for the Education Department (during the apartheid years). Here I was also introduced to anti-bias education, which is about taking a stand against gender and race biases. For me it was just eye-opening!

At what point did you then decide to go and study for your Master's Degree?

When I was 36, I went back to UNISA as I really do like learning new things and then afterwards I joined UCT to do my Master's. I went to do science in early education. I was interested that there was just this huge gap of science and nature in all the schools that I had been to when I was at ELRU. There was very little to reference, all my information came from previous practice. It was wonderful!

When and where did the idea of starting the *Africa A+ Schools* NGO originate?

Not with me. I ended up registering it, but basically it was Paul Steenkamp from Standard Bank who began it all. Standard Bank wanted to set themselves up as *the* bank in Africa, but realised this would require a citizenry that is creative, imaginative, takes initiative and problem solves. So Paul's question was: How do we get a citizenry like that? Through education – we need a pipeline and we need to start in early education.

How was it decided to use the *A+* model of education?

Paul Steenkamp started researching and looking around the world for an educational approach that actually spoke to all of these things and he came across the ***A+ Schools*** in Oklahoma, USA, and started a conversation with them. It grew out of there. He put it forward, it was his baby, his project.

The Department of Economic Development and Tourism came in with some funding and the rest was from Standard Bank. The Cape Craft and Design Institute joined as well and a Board was created with representatives from the three organisations, long before I (Anya) came along.

I responded to their ad for Project Director as I thought it looked absolutely fantastic. Not because I thought that I could be a Project Director, but because I wanted to say to them, I'm here, because you will need an early childhood person to actually call upon. So I went for the interviews and lo and behold, they decided I was the right person. I don't think they chose the right person. I think they should have chosen an organisational development person and then co-opted an early childhood educator to actually guide them along the way.

Why was the *A+* approach chosen?

Paul Steenkamp had already decided on the ***A+*** Approach as he had spent a year or two talking to ***A+ Oklahoma***. He chose it because it was educating through the arts and because the focus was on creativity.

What do you consider to be the biggest highlights of your first three years of *A+* in the Western Cape?

It was being exposed to the ***A+*** approach. I mean, it was mind-boggling, actually. It was quite a huge mind-shift. For the teachers and myself, it was the hardest to shift our thinking. The artists had no problem at all making the shift. At times it felt difficult to manage our very different ideas (education and art), but ultimately the two together were fantastic. The whole art experience,

introducing us to the artists and how to take it across into early education, that was really mind blowing!

The way that **A+** worked was also a highlight – they also introduced us to working on Google Docs and of course, the arts and creativity. **A+** was very professional and the way they ran things was also a very interesting insight for us.

The eight A+ essentials form the backbone of the A+ approach. How easy was it for you to take that on board?

It was huge. And I can't say that in the three years of the pilot, any of us had fully taken it on board. What was very useful for me is that in the planning form you do have a checklist of **A+** Essentials and the Multiple Intelligences and often we would go back – oh, we've forgotten this, oh, we've forgotten that. That would keep us on track. But it was not an easy mental shift to make. We understood it in theory and were completely on board, but the actual application of it and keeping it in the forefront took us a long time to do.

Many of our teachers and artists had Masters Degrees. It's not like having an advanced education made it easier for you to take it on. It was almost a visceral thing. Like you had to embody it. It was a very interesting process. It's only as I've gone along and really lived it and worked it, that it has become really mine. I've really owned it.

What do you consider to be the biggest highlights of your work in Kouga?

I think working with Yolande (Delpont, an **A+** Facilitator), as an artist, has been the biggest highlight. The way that the artist and the teacher complement each other, but also sometimes how they actually conflict and how you work your way through that. How I've gained things from being exposed to the arts and how Yolande has gained things from being exposed to the education. That educator/artist collaboration is probably the highlight, for me.

What do you think it is about the inclusion of the Arts in A+ that makes it so different to other ways of training?

I think the arts are hugely neglected. They're often considered soft skills, or a nice to have, if you have the time, but here the arts are put front and centre. The arts release something in people and that's why it's lovely to start with the arts. We often have quite a lot of fairly fearful or anxious teachers when they start training, and as soon as you introduce the arts, it really releases things in people and enables them to be creative and to be imaginative. And confident. You know, it just opens something in people, then afterwards, you can actually slide very nicely into, oh, how do you do this with children in your schools?

In terms of the A+ context, what do you think has worked well for teacher training?

I think one of the things that Eric Atmore (Director of the Centre for Early Childhood Development in Cape Town) said, that the most brilliant thing is actually to train a group of facilitators, so that when we're gone, they are still there and still supporting. I think that is probably one of the most powerful things that we do in **A+**, that nobody else seems to do.

The three years (duration of training programmes), I think, is another very critical thing. It takes time to change mindsets and then the behaviour has to change as well. The implementation.

The five days of initial training are also really important. That also opens up people. In five days they get to know each other and there is something about five days of **A+** that really shifts a lot of things in people and makes them really enthusiastic about **A+**.

And that play is allowed and play is fun, and the arts, and of course it is very tactile and physical and includes music and dance. That is something I would never take away from **A+**.

How do you view your time with A+ in your overall career?

It's been amazing, it really has. **A+** is full of passionate, committed and highly skilled people that care about giving children an education that prepares them for the future world.

It has not always been easy. It's taken quite a lot of mental energy. Getting an NGO off the ground is just really, really difficult in terms of finances. Thankfully, Giulietta came along as it wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for her. Giulietta has all the qualities of an Executive Director. She is an academic and she has also run an NGO. There's Yolande the artist, Giulietta with the executive skills and myself as the early childhood specialist. I'm one who likes to work at the coalface. I'm not an academic, nor am I a director, actually. So, it's been a group of people. That is what actually has sustained **A+**.

Do you still believe that the A+ approach is the best? Or do you believe there is something better available?

Definitely, I'm an **A+** fan through and through! I do think that in the South African context, some things might need to change. It was interesting and after this long five-year term (in Kouga), we've had quite a lot of time to think about it. If you want teachers to be creative, you have to attend to their creativity first. If you want them to be interested in the arts, you have to attend to that. If you want a play-based approach, then you have to play with those teachers. So for me, teacher training in the **A+** approach is probably the best thing you could do for children and the citizens in South Africa.

What would you have done differently?

I would begin with a bit more of a didactic approach, just around setting up the classroom environment. What we found is that it takes a long time to build some of the basics. So you start off with a basic set up and then build from there. What is lovely about **A+**, it's all about exposing and immersing teachers in, and enabling them to do **A+**, because they *want* to do it.

I would do a lot more leadership training, because the leaders need to become teacher-trainers. So in other words, how do we equip Principals to be really confident about what **A+** they want to see in their centres, and how do they convey this to their staff?

In projects, I would claim ownership of materials [intellectual property] because **A+** is doing the pedagogy and what the teachers are going to do with the children. I would include a lot of open-ended materials, solid things that toddlers and older children can play with.

The *Important Book* by Margaret Wise Brown (1949), marks a starting point for our participants on their A+ journey. What is “the important thing” about Anja?

I'm just a person trying to get along in the world and hopefully do a good job and leave it for others to find better. Working with what I call the vulnerable – animals, plants and children – is really my soft spot, and to make a difference.

In true A+ tradition, we will end this interview with *the last word*. What is *your* last word?

I wish **A+** would fly! It is totally the right way for every child in South Africa to be educated. It really, really is. I wish people would hurry up and discover it. I understand that there is no silver bullet like technology or whatever. There's just good old teachers, training teachers well, so that teachers can actually teach in a way that you want them to shape children.

Any, thank you so much for your time. It has been a privilege to conduct this interview with you, to be steeped in the wealth of your experience, your commitment, your passion for A+ and everything that you have brought to the organisation. Thank you!

Interview by June O'Neill (**A+** Senior Facilitator)

A History of Africa A+ Schools (A+)

The identity of an organization is shaped by its history. As **A+** celebrates its **10th Anniversary**, it is appropriate that we take a look back at where we came from.

Journey to A+ 10th Anniversary



Made with  Napkin

2014 (initiation phase):

- Paul Steenkamp of Standard Bank had initiated the concept of **Africa A+ Schools (A+)**, prior to 2014. The concept was based on the work of **Oklahoma A+ Schools Institute (OKA+)** which has its base at the University of Central Oklahoma, USA.
- A Board had been established for **A+**, comprised of representatives from Standard Bank, the Department of Economic Development & Tourism (DEDaT), the Cape Craft & Design Institute (CCDI) and **OKA+**. Each organization committed three years' of support.
- **A+** was planned as an initiative and pilot project in Early Childhood Education (ECE) that could address the South Africa context.
- Funding for **A+** was provided by Standard Bank and DEDaT.

2015 (pilot phase):

- A stakeholders' planning workshop was held. A steering committee was convened with representatives from Standard Bank, DEDaT and the CCDI.

- A Project Director, Anya Morris, was contracted for three years.
- Anya and the CCDI Executive Director, Erica Elk, undertook a study visit to **Oklahoma A+ Schools Institute (OKA+)** in the USA where they and **OKA+** (Sandy Kent, Rosalynn Wade, Jennifer Richard and Cindy Scarberry) planned a three-year **A+** training and mentorship programme for a pilot project.
- ECE stakeholders in Cape Town, such as ELRU and Grassroots, nominated ECE sites. Three ECE sites in Cape Town, with a total of 26 staff and 205 children were contracted as the first members of the **A+** pilot project.
- Four local artists and three early childhood specialists were invited and contracted to be part-time **A+** facilitators.
- The **OKA+** team facilitated three days of professional development for the **A+** team members.
- A reference group of five experienced NPO and ECD leaders was convened to guide and support, Anya, the Project Director.
- The pilot project was named **Africa A+ Schools (A+)** and branded. The first **A+** newsletter was emailed to stakeholders. Anya Morris and Liezel de Waal, from M&ESURE, created vision, mission, objectives, theory of change and logic model for **A+**.

2016 (pilot phase):

- A five-day **A+** orientation for the principals and all staff of the three **A+** schools was facilitated and modelled by **OKA+**. The **A+** team participated as observers.
- The principals and staff of the three **A+** schools attended a one-day Winter Conference co-planned with **OKA+** and facilitated by **A+**.
- **A+** facilitated leadership workshops and meetings for school leaders.
- Three additional ECE sites in Cape Town, applied and were contracted to join the **A+** network.
- All **A+** activities were co-planned with **OKA+**. Each school support activity was planned and facilitated on-site by two experienced arts and ECE **A+** facilitators.
- The Project Director facilitated quarterly development workshops with the 10 **A+** facilitators, co-planned and facilitated by the Project Director and **OKA+** facilitators.
- The **A+** Facebook page was updated weekly.
- Two independent ECE researchers, Linda Biersteker and Fiona Burt, were contracted to collect and analyse data from the three **A+** schools and parents, and to compile an evaluation report.
- The three-year **A+** budget was extended to four years.

2017 (pilot phase):

- Three new schools started in January 2017 to bring the number of **A+** schools to six.
- Professional development for Principals and staff of the six **A+** schools.
- **A+** operationalized the research report's recommendations.
- One facilitator resigned and two contracts were not renewed. Four new apprentice **A+** facilitators joined the **A+** team.
- Support activities at the six **A+** schools continued to be co-planned with **OKA+**.
- The **A+** website was launched.
- **A+** was registered as a Non-Profit Organization.

2018 (operational phase):

- The **A+** network consisted of five schools with 44 staff and 481 children. School support activities continued formally until April 2018. The pilot project and funding ended in April 2018.

- After the pilot project in April 2018, the **A+** Project Director continued support workshops for the schools pro bono.
- After the end of the pilot project (April), the five school leaders unanimously decided to continue and grow the **Africa A+ Schools** network. Although the initial idea was to emulate the structure of **OKA+**, the **A+** model was adapted to suit local circumstances while adhering to the pedagogical principles of **OKA+**.
- Dr Giulietta Harrison (photo) was invited by Anya Morris to join **A+** as Executive Director. Anya became Programme Director and the head office was relocated to Riebeek East, Eastern Cape, where Dr Harrison lived.
- Sofisa Phillips agency approached Dr Harrison about an ECE project in Kouga district, Eastern Cape. **A+** approached the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD) to be a partner in the project, and a proposal was drafted and accepted by Sofisa Phillips and the funder.



2019 (operational phase):

- A banking account was opened and 18A status applied for to facilitate fundraising.
- Continuation of professional development and implementation support at five ECE Pilot Project schools.
- Kouga Windfarm Community Trust (KWCT) and **A+** partnered with CECD on an ECE project in the Kouga district of Eastern Cape. The project was funded by KWCT.
- **A+** and CECD carried out a baseline study of 33 preschools in five wards of Kouga district to determine the status quo and needs of the schools. This study created a basis for future work.
- Dr Giulietta Harrison and Anya Morris spent a week reiterating the constitution, writing funding materials, and planning project activities.
- Shayne Eastman (photo) was appointed as Financial Manager for **A+**.



2020 (operational phase):

- The **Africa A+ Summer Conference**, run by Anya Morris, was held in January 2020 in Cape Town. The conference was attended by 57 participants from the five **A+**-affiliated Western Cape schools.
- Quotation from a participant in Western Cape: *"I am blown away. I am just blown away. This is what teachers need, not more certificates."*
- The Kouga Windfarm Community Trust ECE Project began in August 2020. Despite the constraints of Covid-19, **A+** succeeded in delivering quality teacher training in three contact sessions of about one week each. (**A+** delivered the pedagogy programme while CECD took care of infrastructural and registration issues.)
- Yolande Delpont (photo), an ECE specialist and artist from Riebeek East, was appointed as an **A+** Facilitator to assist the **A+** Project Leader, Anya Morris, in Kouga.
- A start-up NPO, **iZinto Africa (iZA)**, under its founder, Carole Scott (photo), was introduced to **A+** by Anya Morris. "iZinto" means "things" or "items" in isiXhosa. **iZA** specializes in the use of "loose parts" (found objects, both manufactured and natural) as resources in teaching and learning.
- **iZA** originated in Cape Town in a storage facility that was funded by Richard Burnett, a Rotary member who was supportive of the work of **A+**.
- The pedagogy of **iZA** is highly compatible with that of **A+**, so it was decided that the two organizations would enter into a close collaboration and partnership. Carole Scott was given the title of Materials Director for **A+**.



2021 (expansion phase):

- Covid-19 prevented the holding of workshops in Western Cape.
- Continuation of the Kouga Windfarm Community Trust Project.
- Professor Spiwo Xapile (photo), Director of the African Centre for management of HIV/AIDS in the world, University of Stellenbosch, pastor at the JL Zwane Presbyterian Church, Community leader and founder of The Platform NPO, invited **A+** to submit a proposal to introduce their work in Malungeni.
- Malungeni is a rural village located in the Ngqeleni district of the former Transkei, Eastern Cape. Prof. Xapile believes that quality early education is vital for the health, wellbeing and economic stability of marginalized South Africans.
- Two successful contact sessions were held in Malungeni under the leadership of Carole Scott with the assistance of Yolande Delport.
- Carole Scott and Anya Morris presented the **iZA** and Malungeni work at the SA Research Association for Early Childhood Education (SARAECE) national conference. The topic was *'The pedagogical potential of discarded materials'*.



2022 (expansion phase):

- Continuation of the Kouga Windfarm Community Trust Project with seven contact sessions, training and supporting 38 ECE centres, 163 staff and benefitting 1434 children.
- Continuation of the Malungeni Early Learning Project with two contact sessions. Teacher enthusiasm was pleasingly obvious.
- Continuation of the **iZA** with creation of a temporary satellite centre in Humansdorp to serve the Kouga district.
- Quotation from a teacher participant in Kouga: *"It gave me the spirit that I can be a teacher to the children and loving one another. I am a better person."* – Noludwe.

2023 (expansion phase):

- Continuation of the Kouga Windfarm Community Trust Project with seven contact sessions.
- Continuation of the Malungeni Early Learning Project with four contact sessions supported by Arm in Arm in Africa and D.G. Murray Trust.
- Continuation of the **iZA**, especially in Humansdorp. A move of Cape Town depot to, and an affiliation with, the Centre for Creative Education (CCE).
- Initiation of the Kathu Solar Park project (KSP) in May 2023. This is a second collaboration between the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD) and **A+**. The participants are from 23 ECE centres in Kathu, Kuruman and Olifantshoek, mostly rural and semi-urban areas.
- Quotation from a teacher participant in Kathu: *"...we do less of art, so because I saw it's exciting, enjoyable, thinkable, I will have to implement more of it."* – Kealeboga Magobe.
- Presentation of *"WhatsApp: a training tool that supports learning, implementation and community building"* at the Quality Early Childhood Development in South Africa conference in Cape Town.
- Facilitated an NCF Curriculum Workshop on 4 July 2023 in Cape Town.
- Appointment of James Harrison (photo) as Fundraiser and Editor.



2024 (consolidation phase):

- Continuation of the Kouga Windfarm Community Trust Project with seven contact sessions.

- Quotation from a Community Facilitator in Kouga: *"I feel I can do anything. I don't see problems anymore, I think differently."* – Felicity Toll.
- Continuation of the Malungeni Early Learning Project with one contact session. Lack of funding was a serious constraint.
- Continuation of the **A+ iZinto Materials Centre** from the Cape Town depot.
- Continuation of the Kathu Solar Park ECE Project with six contact sessions.
- Quotation from a teacher in Kathu: *"Love the art part, would definitely use it. It was exciting and the kids loved it."* – Daphney Goanathebe.
- Quotation from a parent in Kathu: *"Today, I learned that playing with friends helps children build key social skills, like listening and problem solving. Playing is a great way to help a child learn while having fun."* – Olorato Dikolanyane.

2025 (consolidation phase):

- ***Celebration of 10th Anniversary of A+!***
- Publication of a chapter in a Springer book entitled, *Early Childhood Pedagogical Practices Across the World: Selected Case Studies on the Role of Teachers for Learning and Care*. The title of the chapter is, *Towards a just pedagogy: Working with 'loose parts' to create dynamic early learning experiences*, by Giulietta Domenica Harrison, Carole Scott, Anya Morris, Yolande Delport, Michaela Ashley-Cooper and James A. Harrison.
- Close-out of the highly successful Kouga Windfarm Community Trust Project.
- Continuation of the Malungeni Early Learning Project with two contact sessions in 2025 to date.
- Continuation of the Kathu Solar Park ECE Project with six contact sessions in 2025 to date.
- Continuation of the **A+ iZinto Materials Centre**.
- Retirement of Anya Morris.
- Upgrading of content and appearance of the **A+** website (<https://africaaplus.org.za/>) – Please have a look!).
- Vigorous fundraising to support the launch of new projects in 2026.

2026 and beyond:

What does the future hold? Many good things, we trust. We will keep you informed.

Extracted and compiled from annual reports by James Harrison (Editor)



A+ Senior Facilitators Yolande Delport and June O'Neill with the staff of Bambi ECD Centre, in Kathu, Northern Cape.



**Africa A+
Schools**
Engaging Curious Minds
South Africa