



Africa A+ Schools

Engaging Curious Minds

South Africa



Early Learning in Malungeni

Field Trip 9 | 12–19 April 2026

Year 2, Field Trip 4

"The best classroom and the widest cupboard is roofed only by the sky."

— Margaret McMillan

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Executive Summary

Africa A+ Schools facilitators Carole Scott and Yolande Delpont recently returned to Malungeni in the Eastern Cape for the fourth field trip of Year 2. This eight-day visit marked the ninth contact session of our ongoing three-year partnership, which aims to strengthen the quality of Early Childhood Development (ECD) in the region.

The week was rich with collaboration, including visits from local community leaders, ECD trainers from Ngqeleni, and social workers from Cape Town. A highlight of this trip was exploring the "Garden Theme," which built on topics from our previous visit and included site visits to several preschools in the surrounding areas.

During the trip, the team conducted the fourth training session for local facilitators and — for the first time — visited three schools that have been part of the programme since its inception. The programme featured two full-day workshops for practitioners at the Kwa Batshofule Community Centre, along with a special Wednesday afternoon session dedicated to local parents and caregivers. The primary goals were to revisit the Africa A+ Essentials, explore the garden as a powerful tool for learning, practise brainstorming for curriculum planning, and engage in creative activities to reconnect with imagination and joy.

The purpose of the workshops was to:

- Review the Africa A+ Essentials and their importance for teaching and learning.
- Explore curriculum through the garden: what can we learn from a garden?
- Practise how brainstorming can generate ideas for curriculum planning.
- Continue to plan curriculum using the brainstorming method.
- Participate in creative activities to connect with and enjoy their own creativity.

Total cost of the 8-day travel and 6-day programme: R 186 490
Sponsored by Arm-in Arm in Africa

1. Programme Activities

The table below provides an overview of the week's schedule, followed by detailed descriptions of each activity.

Date	Activities
12th April	TRAVEL to Malungeni from Cape Town and Riebeeck East
13th April	On-site check-in visits — Mzonyane Pre-School; Hall Set-Up
14th April	On-site check-in visits — Nodumile Pre-School; Hlalanathi Pre-School
15th April	Facilitator Training — Mbangisweni Pre-School; Parents Workshop — Batshofule Community Hall
16th April	Practitioner Workshop 1 — Batshofule Community Hall
17th April	Practitioner Workshop 2 — Batshofule Community Hall
18th April	Pack up and consolidate next steps
19th April	TRAVEL from Malungeni to Riebeeck East and Cape Town

1.1 On-Site Check-In Visits

The A+ facilitators visited three schools for the very first time during this field trip — all of which have been part of the programme since it began. A+ facilitators can only visit a few school during each field trip due to the vast distances in location between schools. A+ is however, committed to visiting all schools participating in the project over time.

Mzonyane Pre-School

Mzonyane Pre-School is located about 30 km outside of Malungeni in the Mpoza area. The drive was slow and difficult due to muddy, slippery roads. Because of the rainy weather, no children had arrived when we first got there, which is often the case on wet days. We were greeted by the principal, Nomvuyo Notayi, and joined by local facilitator Babalwa Tshafuthi.

The school is a solid brick building with a spacious classroom and two side rooms used for cooking and storage. Outside, there is a large, fenced play area with a jungle gym. The school is officially registered and is currently being improved, with construction materials on-site for an upcoming infrastructure upgrade. Inside, the classroom already shows signs of different learning spaces — areas for art, building, and pretend play — and is well-equipped with Lego blocks, art supplies, and small indoor slides.

When a few children arrived, the staff sat them in chairs and brought out a heater. Nomvuyo asked us to demonstrate how to set up the room for active play. We moved the furniture to create a playdough station, a drawing area, and a building space on a large foam mat — showing that children don't need to sit and wait, but can start choosing where to play as soon as they arrive. We also talked about helping children become more independent by having a dedicated spot for them to hang their own jackets when they walk through the door.



Clockwise L–R: Mzonyane principal Nomvuyo Notayi and staff with Mzi and local facilitator Babalwa Tshafuthi; Assistant converses with children at the playdough table; Setting up the learning areas; Art area showing bags of cement for forthcoming infrastructure upgrades.

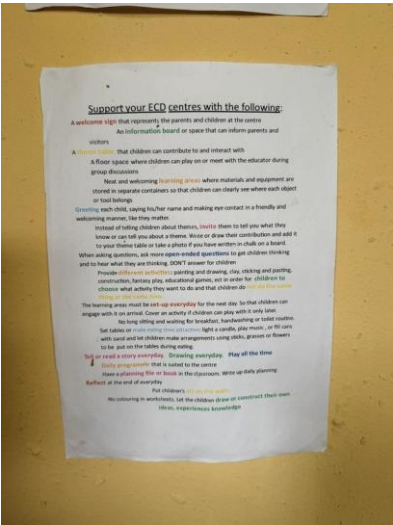
Nodumile Pre-School

Nodumile Pre-School is located in Godini location, about 35 km from Malungeni. The village is perched on a hill surrounded by steep cliffs and thick forests, and the journey required careful driving along heavily muddy roads. We were met by principal Nonstapho Gwegyeza. The school has a small brick building with a main classroom and three side rooms, alongside a large, fenced playground with a well-maintained jungle gym.

Inside, the school is spotless and exceptionally well-organised. Nonstapho keeps all attendance books, visitor logs, and student files neatly in order. The kitchen was equally clean, with the cook busy preparing a nutritious lunch of chicken stew with carrots, potatoes, and rice. As children began to arrive, an assistant helped them with their jackets and had them sit quietly in chairs along the wall.

To encourage a more active start to the day, the facilitators moved the chairs aside and demonstrated how to get children started on activities the moment they walk in. Nonstapho brought out a blanket for the floor, and we emptied a set of Lego blocks for the children to explore. Because their current theme was transport, the children immediately began building vehicles to "take the animals to town" — giving us a wonderful opportunity to point out the deep learning happening through their play.

When Nonstapho asked about teaching the children to write their names, we discussed how recognising their names is an important first step. Placing name labels on the wall above boot pegs is one practical way to begin this routine. We also emphasised that free drawing and "scribble writing" are the true beginnings of literacy, showing how a child could start by simply drawing a picture of the Lego structure they had just built.



L–R: Nodumile Pre-School building; Construction area and fantasy area; Nonstapho with her collection of newspaper stories; Child copying her construction; A+ information on the wall.

Hlalanathi Pre-School

Hlalanathi Pre-School is situated along the road toward Port St Johns, just outside Mthatha in the Zimpungeni location. The school is currently operating from a temporary site while waiting for its new building to be completed. In a wonderful show of community spirit, a local family offered their garage space so that children would have a place to learn in the meantime. The school is led by principal Fundiswa Maxhalangha, supported by an assistant who also manages the cooking.

Despite the rainy weather, the sun broke through during our visit and all the children were happily playing outside. It was wonderful to witness such free and joyful exploration of the outdoor space. When rain returned, the children came inside for a ring time — giving the facilitators a perfect opportunity to lead a "discussion ring." With Mzi translating into the children's mother tongue, A+ facilitator Yolande explored the theme of "My Body." Rather than simply naming body parts, the

session demonstrated how practitioners can turn a discussion into an active, engaging experience — encouraging children to think about how their bodies move and work, drawing comparisons to animals outside, and weaving in mathematical exploration and language development.



L–R: Hlalanathi Pre-School; Children enjoying outside free play before the rain; Organised materials on a shelf; Posters and daily routine on the wall; New school building in progress; A+ facilitator leads a body discussion; The generous space once chairs are packed away, with a rug for playing.

1.2 Workshops

The A+ facilitators, with the support of Mzikayise Ndzuzo, conducted four workshops across Wednesday 15th, Thursday 16th, and Friday 17th April: the fourth local facilitator workshop in the morning, a parent and caregiver workshop in the afternoon of the same day, and two full practitioner workshops on the following days.

Local Facilitator Training — Workshop 4

The fourth local facilitator workshop took place in the church hall at Mbangisweni Pre-School. Four of the five local facilitators attended, with an apology received from Nosabelo Vava, who has been managing some health challenges. The main goals were to:

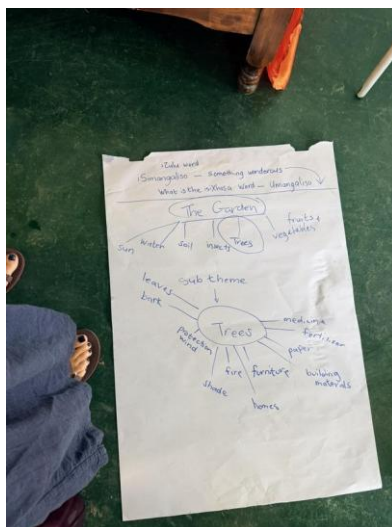
- Master the art of thematic brainstorming.
- Integrate A+ Essentials into daily rural ECD practice.
- Fluently link creative play to ELDA standards.
- Demonstrate that high-quality learning resources can be built from the natural environment.

The workshop opened with "Awakening the Senses" — a nature walk behind the church hall where facilitators collected natural materials and scooped soil into yoghurt containers. Back inside, the group explored the textures, smells, and visual qualities of leaves, bark, sticks, and stones. These "natural loose parts" were placed on trays and the group brainstormed different ways these simple materials could be used with children.

A "Radical Brainstorm" followed, producing a collaborative mind map exploring how a garden theme connects to all areas of child development — from the physical strength built by digging and planting, to the thinking skills developed through a seed's life cycle, to the social skills learned by sharing a watering can, and the language development fostered by naming local plants in their mother tongue.

Facilitators then designed specific activities based on the garden theme, ensuring all learning pathways were included — making the sounds of the wind (music), moving like caterpillars (physical development) — to engage all children fully.

Finally, the group mapped their activities directly to the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and Early Learning and Development Areas (ELDAs), seeing precisely how a simple garden activity satisfies the formal requirements for early childhood education. The session closed with reflection on the unique advantages of a rural environment, where nature is readily accessible for experiential learning.





L–R: Local facilitators show their collections from the walk; Brainstorming ideas for activities; Collections from the walk; Facilitator demonstrates the activities.

Parent and Caregiver Workshop

The A+ facilitators used a playdough activity to give parents a tangible experience of how children learn. By moving from "doing" to "understanding," parents discovered how play supports the four main areas of child development, gaining the confidence and language to advocate for play-based learning both at home and in the community.

Workshop goals:

- Show parents that play is the most important "job" a child has.
- Connect hands-on play to four key areas: body, mind, emotions, and language.
- Explain how simple sensory play builds "soft skills" — such as creativity and resilience — essential for the future.
- Give parents simple, accessible language for talking about the value of play with family and teachers.

As parents arrived, they made a simple ball of playdough following a recipe on their table. They then played with it freely — squeezing, smelling, and shaping — without instructions or goals for ten minutes. During the follow-up discussion, many parents noted that their stress levels dropped and they felt more willing to experiment, because there was no "right" or "wrong" outcome.

A second activity connected this tactile experience to the four main areas of child development. Parents visited four stations — Language, Physical, Social and Emotional, and Cognitive — exploring how playdough activates specific growth. They discovered how "finger gym" movements build the physical strength required for future writing, how building structures introduces mathematical and problem-solving concepts, and how language skills grow through describing their creations.

The final portion connected these activities to the future — how play prepares children for a world in constant change, and how children who play with open-ended materials develop innovation, cognitive flexibility, and a sense of agency.



L–R: Families make their playdough; Mixing the colour into the dough; Dr Xapile joins the group; The youngest visitor explores some loose parts.

"My child used to play fantasy play in my bed and draw on my walls. Now I will show him where to do it and praise him for doing it. If they do not play they do not grow."

— A Parent Reflects

Practitioner Workshop 1 — Seeing Learning Everywhere

Theme: The Garden

This experiential workshop immersed practitioners in the permaculture garden to explore how natural environments support holistic child development. Through movement, observation, and creative exploration, participants generated ideas for learning opportunities linked to all four developmental domains. Workshop goals:

- Develop observation and noticing skills.
- Explore the garden as a dynamic learning environment.
- Generate creative, curriculum-linked activity ideas.
- Begin linking experiences directly to developmental domains.

The morning opened with the "Garden Metaphor" activity. Working in small groups, participants described themselves and their roles through visual performance — acting out their "garden" and freezing mid-performance to create a tableau. In the follow-up discussion, participants identified which Africa A+ Essentials were present and how the activity activated various developmental domains.

Following a tea break, participants took the "Sensory Garden Walk," each given a "Noticing Card" with a specific prompt: I see, I hear, I feel, or I wonder. They took a slow, quiet walk through the surrounding garden, recording observations in notebooks — a powerful reminder of how much is often missed in everyday surroundings.

Participants then rotated through four "Observation Stations." Station 1 focused on textures and senses, finding descriptive words in isiXhosa. Station 2 explored a nature table where practitioners designed mini activity posters. Station 3 explored a "mud kitchen" with water and soil. Station 4 focused on movement, brainstorming physical activities such as climbing and balancing. The session closed with a group ELDA mapping exercise and a shared realisation that a garden is a rich, low-cost resource for developing language, physical skills, and a deep love for learning.





L–R: Practitioners discussing the A+ Essentials; Mzi leading an energiser; Practitioners participating in the art provocation; Practitioners making their dolls.

Practitioner Workshop 2 — Growing Great Minds in the Garden

This interactive workshop supported ECD practitioners in strengthening their ability to plan meaningful, play-based learning experiences for children aged 0–4, in alignment with South Africa's National Curriculum Framework. Using the metaphor of a garden, participants explored how children's language, cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development grow together through well-planned activities.

The morning began with "The Garden Ecosystem Hunt." Four stations representing developmental domains — labelled in both English and isiXhosa — were set up around the room. As music played, practitioners moved through the space until a scenario was called out (for example, "children digging" or "two friends pretending to be butterflies"). Participants then ran to the domain corner that best matched the activity, sparking a rich discussion about how a child's body, brain, and feelings cannot be separated.

A nature-themed energiser called "Seed, Plant, Tree" — an adaptation of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" — followed, with practitioners using their bodies to transform from a crouching seed into a kneeling plant, and finally into a tall, outstretched tree.

Divided into teams named after garden inhabitants (The Bees, The Butterflies, and The Ladybirds), groups rotated through six ELDA stations using the "Yes, and..." approach to build on each other's ideas. These posters became a shared resource for a collaborative weekly planning session, ensuring every school left with a structured plan for the upcoming term.

After lunch and a "Flower Spoon Relay," the group moved into the "Creative Idea Lab" — a hands-on art session featuring tile printing, colour matching, weaving, and making wire-and-fabric insects. The workshop closed with a shared understanding that, much like a seed, every child needs a carefully planned and nurturing environment to truly flourish.





Workshop 2 — practitioners in action: garden ecosystem hunt, creative idea lab stations, and practitioner reflections.

Practitioner Reflections:

"The garden can be a beautiful place to visit with children. Spending time in the garden makes your soul feel relieved and calmed down."

"To have a garden in a preschool is very important. There are more lessons there and so much creativity. I can plant many different plants in my small garden at the centre."

"At my centre I will introduce the mud kitchen. I like that the children can be creative and add water to soil and pretend to bake cakes."

"I will use our garden more as a classroom for ELDA 6, Knowledge and Understanding of the World."

1.3 General

The fourth field trip of Year 2 focused on exploring the "Garden Theme" as a central tool for teaching and learning across the Malungeni district. By visiting old and new pre-schools, the team was able to see how the Africa A+ Essentials look in different environments — from spacious brick buildings to temporary community-led spaces. The trip successfully combined intensive practitioner workshops with hands-on site visits and a parent engagement session, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Visiting local schools for the first time that are part of the project is always exciting for the A+ facilitators, as it gives them a chance to see how much of the A+ approach has been embedded in day-to-day routines, and allows practitioners to voice where they need support.

A+ facilitators are welcomed into the Malungeni community during every visit, and locals still pop in to say hello even if they are not part of the workshops. Tata visits on every trip and receives his name tag along with art materials that he enjoys using.

It is always inspiring to observe the work being done in Malungeni. The local farm around Kwa Batshofule has grown significantly and now includes vegetables that locals sell to the community and to the local supermarket in the nearby town of Ngqeleni, providing employment to many in the area.

This set of workshops around the garden theme proved very successful — practitioners immersed themselves in the garden and learned many new things about gardening. Many reflected on how easy it would be to set up a small garden at their centres, particularly as they grew aware of the many learning opportunities a garden offers.



L–R: The cook watching over the fire; Potjie pot cooking for lunch; Lunch of locally grown pumpkin, spinach, cabbage, mutton stew, and umngqusho (samp and beans).

2. Expenditure

The proposal budget and actual expenditure for Field Trip 4 were as follows:

Items	Budget	Actual Costs
Planning, facilitation, follow-up: 2 facilitators x 8 working days	R 63 706	R 63 706
Security, facilitation and translation: 1 facilitator @ R895 per day	R 4 475	R 4 475
Community Co-ordinator	R 10 500	R 10 500
M&E baseline report — not required this field trip	R 0,00	R 0,00
Financial management: bookkeeper @ R5 250 per contact session	R 5 250	R 5 250
Community Facilitator Stipend	R 30 000	R 30 000
Oversight and strategic support by Director of A+	R 6 300	R 6 300
Web management: website and Facebook updates	R 4 200	R 4 200
Accommodation: 2 facilitators x 7 nights @ R685/person + 1 facilitator @ R275 x 7 nights	R 11 515	R 11 515
Meals: 2 facilitators' lunch & supper x 7 days @ R144/person + 1 facilitator @ R200 x 7 days	R 3 416	R 3 416
Airfare return Cape Town – East London	R 6 300	R 4 703
Travel: 1 850 km Gauteng to Mthatha return @ R5,5 per km (Co-ordinator)	R 10 175	R 10 175
Car Hire Deposit	R 7 000	—
Travel: Bus travel Khayelitsha–Mthatha 1 163 km return	R 1 800	R 1 800
Travel: 1 600 km Riebeeck–East London–Malungeni return (car hire and fuel)	R 8 400	R 8 580,93 (*R 180,93)
Travel per diem: 1 facilitator x 2 days @ R200 per day	R 400	R 400
Travel per diem: 2 facilitators x 2 days @ R295 per day	R 1 180	R 1 180
Day catering: 7 ECD leaders & 2 A+ facilitators x 2 days	R 3 000	R 3 000
Workshop catering: 30 participants (ECD workshop) + 30 parents/caregivers + 2 facilitators	R 9 954	R 9 954
PPE	R 110	R 83,97
Resources: printing, newsprint, koki pens (parent & ECD workshops)	R 3 990	R 3 800,24
Data @ R550 x 2 facilitators	R 1 100	R 1 100
Contingency ¹	R 5 000	R 1 037,36 ²
TOTAL	R 197 771	R 186 498,87

¹ Contingency of R5000 is included to handle unexpected costs.

² R 180,93 shortfall for car hire and R1 416,07 shortfall for fuel costs totals R 1 037,36 from contingency

3. Programme Highlights

Some highlights included:

The Garden as a Classroom:

Practitioners moved beyond seeing a garden as just an outdoor space. They successfully mapped nature-based activities — exploring soil, seeds, and insects — directly to the NCF and ELDAs, proving that "playing in the dirt" is high-level, curriculum-aligned learning.

Parent and Caregiver Engagement:

A special Wednesday afternoon session allowed parents to experience the Africa A+ approach firsthand. By using playdough to feel the "work" of play, parents gained the language needed to advocate for their children's learning at home and in the community.

Creative Idea Labs:

Facilitators and practitioners reconnected with their own creativity through hands-on art stations. Activities like tile printing, weaving, and wire-insect making provided practical inspiration that teachers could take directly back to their classrooms.

Collaborative Planning:

Using a "Yes, and..." approach, practitioners from different schools worked together to brainstorm and design weekly curriculum plans, turning individual ideas into a shared resource and ensuring every school left with a structured plan for the upcoming term.

Local Leadership:

The presence and active support of local community leaders — including Dr Spiwo Xapile and Zethu Xapile — alongside the ongoing involvement of local facilitators Mzi Ndzuzo and Babalwa Tshafuthi, highlighted the deep-rooted community ownership at the heart of this project.

Visiting local schools for the first time that are part of the project is always exciting for the A+ facilitators, as it gives them a chance to see how much of the A+ approach is embedded in the day-to-day routines of the school, and allows practitioners to voice where they need support.

A+ facilitators are welcomed into the Malungeni community during every visit, and locals still pop in to say hello even if they are not part of the workshops. Tata visits on every trip and receives his name tag along with art materials that he enjoys using.

It is always inspiring to observe the work being done in Malungeni. The local farm around Kwa Batshofule has grown significantly and now includes vegetables that locals sell to the community and to the nearby supermarket in Ngqeleni, providing employment to many in the area.

This set of workshops around the garden theme proved very successful — practitioners immersed themselves in the garden and learned many new things. Many reflected on how easy it would be to set up a small garden at their centres, particularly as they grew aware of the many learning opportunities a garden offers.

4. Programme Challenges

While the trip was full of progress, several challenges highlighted the realities of working in a rural context and the ongoing need for support:

Environmental and Infrastructure Obstacles:

The rainy weather and thick mud made navigating the roads to schools like Mzonyane and Nodumile extremely difficult and slow. These same conditions often prevent children from attending school at all, as many families keep children home when paths become slippery or dangerous.

Recovering from Natural Disasters and Building Degradation:

The fact that infrastructure has been out of commission due to flooding and building degradation highlights the vulnerability of these learning spaces to the elements. The presence of construction materials at multiple sites shows that many schools are still in a state of transition or temporary housing.

Resource Constraints and Temporary Spaces:

Operating out of temporary sites — such as the community garage at Hlalanathi — presents unique challenges for setting up a permanent, resource-rich learning environment. Facilitators must be incredibly creative to turn these temporary spaces into functional classrooms.

Shift from Passive to Active Learning:

A recurring challenge in workshops and site visits is moving away from standard "schoolification" teaching habits. Children spend a lot of time sitting in chairs. It remains a hurdle to shift the routine from children sitting quietly upon arrival to immediately engaging in independent, self-chosen play.

The Pressure of Academic Expectations:

Principals often expressed a sense of pressure to teach formal skills — such as writing names — very early. Facilitators had to spend significant time explaining how "scribble writing" and name recognition through play are the necessary, age-appropriate building blocks for literacy that must come before formal penmanship.

Language and Translation Needs:

To ensure the concepts of the National Curriculum and ELDAs are fully understood and implemented, there is a constant need for careful translation. Ensuring that deep educational theory is accessible in practitioners' mother tongue is essential but requires intentional time and effort.

5. Online Support

Between field trips, the WhatsApp group remains a vital space for the development of our community of practice. Africa A+ facilitators check in regularly, encouraging practitioners to post photos and videos of their latest projects. This platform allows teachers to celebrate their successes and inspire one another by sharing how they are bringing the garden theme into their classrooms through art, movement, and sensory play.

In addition to the main group, a specialised WhatsApp group has been established for our local facilitators. This smaller group provides a direct line for mentorship and support as these leaders grow in their roles. Whether they are asking for advice on a specific activity or seeking guidance on how to support a nearby centre, the Africa A+ facilitators are always available to answer questions. This digital connection ensures that the momentum from our workshops continues to grow, empowering local facilitators to lead with confidence as they support the ECD centres in their own communities.

6. Recommendations

Strengthening the Move Toward Independence

A major focus for future visits should be supporting practitioners as they transition away from a "sit and wait" classroom culture. Recommendations include helping teachers design specific "Arrival Activities" where children can immediately engage with open-ended materials, allowing them to practise independence from the moment they enter the school.

Developing All-Weather Learning Environments

Given the challenges posed by rain and mud, schools should be encouraged to develop "Indoor Garden" resources alongside other in-class materials. This might include indoor-friendly nature trays, sensory bins filled with dry soil or seeds, and "loose parts" that can be stored easily — ensuring that even on wet days, children still have access to tactile, nature-based learning.

Parent-Practitioner Advocacy Partnerships

Building on the success of the parent workshop, the project should encourage schools to hold regular "Play Mornings." These short sessions would allow parents to see their children engaging with the four developmental domains in person. Providing parents with simple, jargon-free language to describe their child's learning will help build a community-wide belief that protects and values play-based education.

Literacy Through Creative Expression

Future training should continue to emphasise that "scribble writing" and drawing are valid and essential precursors to formal writing. We recommend providing practitioners with more low-cost book-making materials such as paper and art supplies. By encouraging children to draw their constructions or garden discoveries, schools can foster name recognition and storytelling in a way that feels like play rather than formal schooling.

A Note of Gratitude

The success of these workshops and the flourishing of the Malungeni area are a direct result of the vision and dedication of Dr Spiwo Xapile. While early childhood education is a vital piece of the puzzle, it is just one part of the incredible community work Dr Xapile coordinates. Alongside his wife, Zethu Xapile, they ensure every detail — from nutritious food to warm accommodation — is in place so that these learning sessions can thrive. With the generous support of funders like Arm in Arm in Africa, these visions are brought to life through a shared commitment to the community.

Dr Xapile is committed to improving the lives of the community of Malungeni and surrounding areas. He believes deeply in community spirit and resilience, but also in the hard work required to make a vision a reality. By bringing people together and valuing the power of relationships, he creates a space where everyone feels they belong.

In Malungeni, "inclusion" is not just a word, but a way of life, evidenced by the warm welcome extended to everyone who visits. It is a true honour for the Africa A+ facilitators to work alongside Dr Xapile, Zethu, and the people of Malungeni toward a brighter tomorrow for South Africa's rural communities.



"When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

— Aldo Leopold