

# An Accreditation Dilemma at Khululeka

by Fioni Murray



*These children are playing handmade musical instruments at outside time, wearing school uniforms fashioned by a group of parents.*

**E**ntering the classroom at Bokang Early Childhood Development Centre, located deep in the heart of the rural mountainous regions around Phuthaditjhaba in the QwaQwa region of South Africa, we find the children and their teacher, Ntswaki, a warm, motherly woman, engaged in small-group time. The children are contently focused and happily engaged with the materials they have been given to work with — a variety of leaves, straw, a few twigs, glue, and paper.

Ntswaki unhurriedly provides one-on-one support by encouraging (“Thato, I see that you are building with the sticks — what are you making?”) and acknowledging (“Lebo, you completed your *rondavel* — where would you like it to be kept in the classroom?”). She copies a little girl who is attaching a large leaf to one end of a stick and holding it above her head like an umbrella.

Though this may be a typical day in a HighScope preschool, it is by no means typical for the average child in South Africa. There are more than five million

children aged 0–4 years who do not currently have access to the education system at any level; 57,000 Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioners would be needed to accommodate them (Martin et al., 2014, pp. 41–42). About half of these children are living in poverty, and of these, only 20% will actually spend time in an early childhood educational setting (p. 45).

The plight of these five million children is indicative of the desperate need for access to quality education in South Africa. Yet ECD funding continues to reflect the vast inequalities and continued inadequacies of the broader South African context, in which the formal certification of every ECD practitioner and caregiver is just not practically possible. But the children still need to be

reached. So for now, this cohort of children, if reached at all, is served in some form of non-center-based setting, by a practitioner who does not qualify to enroll in an accredited training program.

## The accreditation dilemma

At first glance, it would seem that becoming accredited should be the goal of any ECD program. Still, when the accreditation of early childhood training programs first came to the fore in South Africa in the early 2000s, Khululeka Community Education Development Centre grappled with the issue intensively. It was important to make an informed decision. On the one hand, we wanted to promote the HighScope Training of Trainers (TOT) program; on the other, seeking accreditation could potentially destroy the uniqueness of what we had to offer the rest of the country.

The ECD sector in South Africa is still fragmented and the notion of what constitutes quality varies greatly. A common misconception is that any program that is accredited must be a quality program. This is a dangerous



*Because they lack the formal education required for certification, many would be disqualified from teaching in preschool classrooms were programs using HighScope to become accredited in South Africa.*

assumption, as in reality, the standards for determining accreditation are only as high as the standards of the people who set them.

There is no denying that accreditation is important for ECD practitioners in terms of their professional development and career path. But all too often the child, on whom these efforts should be focused, is lost in the picture. In addition, many of those already working with (or who aspire to work with) young children do not have the academic qualifications required to meet the entry criteria for a Level 4 Certificate in ECD. This two-year training program accredited by the South African Qualifications Authority requires that participants have at least a

Grade 9 formal education to be eligible for enrollment.

Over the years we have come to realize that HighScope works at depth, and with its comprehensive attention to detail and rigor, supports full transformation in the understanding, attitudes, and abilities of each course participant — which in turn enables them to share the same quality with those classroom practitioners they train. This has been true even when both the trainer and trainees lack the formal education required for ECD certification. We clearly understand that the teacher, her approach to the children in her care, and her understanding of what and how children need to develop and learn opti-

mally is the critical factor in any child's early learning experiences.

## **Sacrificing accreditation, retaining value**

In 2013, an external evaluation of the Khululeka HighScope TOT program was commissioned, and the question of accreditation for the program once again surfaced. This evaluation noted the strong arguments in favor of accrediting ECD training as part of formalizing, professionalizing, and improving the standards in ECD as a whole. For one, accredited training is often more desirable to trainees. Having an accredited program could potentially attract a pool of dedicated applicants drawn to the opportunity for formal training and career mobility. In addition, as any Regional Training Organization (RTO) is aware, accreditation provides access to government subsidies — money that is sorely needed by most ECD programs.

Increasing the quantity and quality of trainees and accessing the funding to support their training are noble and worthwhile goals, and that would seem to make accreditation the priority of any program. But accreditation would also require Khululeka to sacrifice objectives that are at least equally important, and unique in the South African context.

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For one, according to this same external evaluation, “the accreditation system makes it difficult to train in practice-oriented approaches, tending to favor theory and paper-based approaches to learning” (Soal, 2013, p. 26).



## Something From Nothing

This book focuses on open-ended play materials that you can find in your everyday environment, materials that are often free or available at low cost. Inspired by a HighScope program in Queenstown, South Africa, it includes pictorial step-by-step directions for making some of the materials and 20 activity plans for using them with children. See page 43 for more details.



HighScope is proudly and definitively in the former category; in this regard, its greatest strength might be considered a weakness in South Africa's accreditation system. Among its adherents, however, there is a strong sense that the TOT's lack of formal accreditation allows it to remain unadulterated and therefore "retain its value and essential contribution" (p. 27).

Additionally, the argument can be made that accreditation would close off HighScope training to a substantial number of potential ECD practitioners who, because of their "educational deprivation," would not be qualified to access the ECD training system. In other words, accreditation might dam the pool of human resources on which training programs depend. Many of our trainees lack formal education. Rather than erect obstacles to their entry, we believe that these valuable potential trainees would benefit most from the practical quality offered by HighScope training.

### The HighScope vision in South Africa

Back in the preschool classroom, the children are putting away their small-group materials and getting ready for planning time. Ntswaki helps them tidy the area as they make the transition from one activity to another. "This course changed the standard in my school forever and renewed my love of the job," she says, her face lighting up. "It made me professional too. HighScope is the answer — and for me, planning was the

cherry on top. I now specialize in daily planning and writing anecdotal notes on the children."

Yet, for teachers like Ntswaki, this newfound hope would not be possible were they required to have a Level 4 certificate. Like many South Africans, Ntswaki lacks the formal education required for entry into an accredited ECD training program. With many community-based ECD practitioners not eligible for this training, the children in their care are doomed to spend their early years in classroom settings devoid of rich learning experiences — that is, if they see the inside of a classroom at all.

"Our school," says Ntswaki, sweeping her arm expansively around the room, "has been equipped in a cost-effective manner. Not a cent was spent." She laughs and adds, "I can no longer walk past anything recyclable without examining it and thinking how I can use it in my classroom." She is grateful for the opportunity that HighScope training provided her. "This course boosted my spirit and renewed my energy. Without it, I would not be

here today, knowing very well what to do with the children to help them develop." After a moment, she adds thoughtfully, "I wish everyone could do it."

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What Ntswaki has achieved is typical of students in the HighScope TOT program. One is immediately struck by the depth of her understanding of what young children need for optimal development — a respectful environment, a teacher who is aware of their



*Though the materials and classrooms are different in many ways, Khululeka shares a commitment to active learning with its US counterparts.*

needs and prepared to scaffold their learning, and a wide variety of materials with which to work.

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Here at Khululeka, we were faced with a difficult decision. Many contributors to the evaluation sought accreditation for the TOT to justify further use of it, and to spread HighScope more broadly. If even a portion of the TOT was accredited, they reasoned, it would allow them to integrate the HighScope approach into their practice. In the end though, the question was resolved by those contributors who suggested that

qualified practitioners could enroll in the HighScope TOT as a form of continuing education — a vehicle for professional enrichment and specialization.

Having ten years firsthand experience of just how HighScope initially transforms the trainers and then, through them, the practitioners and the learning environments and experiences they bring to the classroom, the decision was made by Khululeka to not tamper with this unique and transformative process so desperately needed, and still so rare, in South Africa.

### **Tough decisions, bright future for Khululeka**

Khululeka believes that the HighScope program has a unique and important role to play — one in which its unaccredited status enables and facilitates the optimal use of available resources. Year after year, TOT trainers from all corners of South Africa have quietly been taking the HighScope approach and methodology into the ECD sites where they work, and making a dramatic impact on the quality of the teaching and learning that happens there. Visitors to these sites are astounded by

the rich learning taking place, despite the bleak surroundings and the paucity of available resources. Slowly over the last 10 years, the impact of the HighScope difference has spread, as more and more people become convinced of its applicability within all contexts.

The outcome of this cost-effective, grassroots transformation did not pass unnoticed by those influential within ECD circles, with the concomitant result that Khululeka has witnessed an ever-increasing interest in its HighScope TOT program. This has resulted in an invitation to bring HighScope to the table in a national initiative to create an ECD Playgroup program, where it is currently being investigated as the most credible and applicable approach for taking an ECD playgroup model to scale.

For Khululeka, this is the culmination of a long and steadfast vision that HighScope is *the* approach and methodology that will truly bring about the educational transformation so keenly desired in South Africa, practitioner by practitioner. ■

**Fioni Murray discovered HighScope in 1991 at a presentation delivered by Clay Shouse. As a certified HighScope trainer and practitioner, she established and taught in the Khululeka HighScope Demonstration Preschool, which she continues to manage as the Director of Research and Evaluation.**

### **References:**

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*There are currently over five million children, infants to 4-year-olds, who do not have access to the education system in South Africa.*

