

THE LANDSCAPE OF
**EARLY
CHILDHOOD**
DEVELOPMENT

TEXT & IMAGES: NICHOLAS CARROLL

We all gasped as the cars ahead narrowly missed a small child running across the road. "We even teach our pre-school children to cross the road", said Zanele shaking her head in disbelief, but looking relieved as the tiny tot retreated to the safety of the eroded township pavement.



01

ZANELE
NZIMAKWE
ECD Team Leader



02

MRS ZINHLE MTHIYANE
Owner of Smanethemba ECD

The Domino Foundation had arranged for us to join the fervent, Zanele Nzimakwe (ECD Team Leader) and her colleague Alfred Madikizela (Driver) on a tour of their partnering Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDC's). This tour was undertaken during Covid-19 Lockdown Level 3. The ECDC's were closed however, but the owners graciously met with us on site to share their insights and perspectives.

A few kilometres into Inanda Township and the rural landscape had become dense with traffic, pedestrians, chickens and uncollected rubbish overflowing onto the roads.

Years back, through a relationship with City Lodge, The Ridge Management Association came to know of the Domino Foundation and has been co-investing in this Durban based NGO, alongside other community centric partners, to assist selected ECD centres in becoming sustainable small businesses. The Domino Foundation commits to a three year journey alongside the school owners, empowering them with the management skills to run profitable and quality early learning enterprises. These skills take the centres beyond the realm of 'crèches, child minding or day care facilities', into thriving critical foundation phase education facilities.

Did you know that without the opportunity of Early Childhood Education and Development during a child's formative years (i.e. newborn – 5 years old), children do not develop improved social skills which better prepares them to engage with children and adults. And this breakdown in social connection has negative consequences on a child's learning, physical and

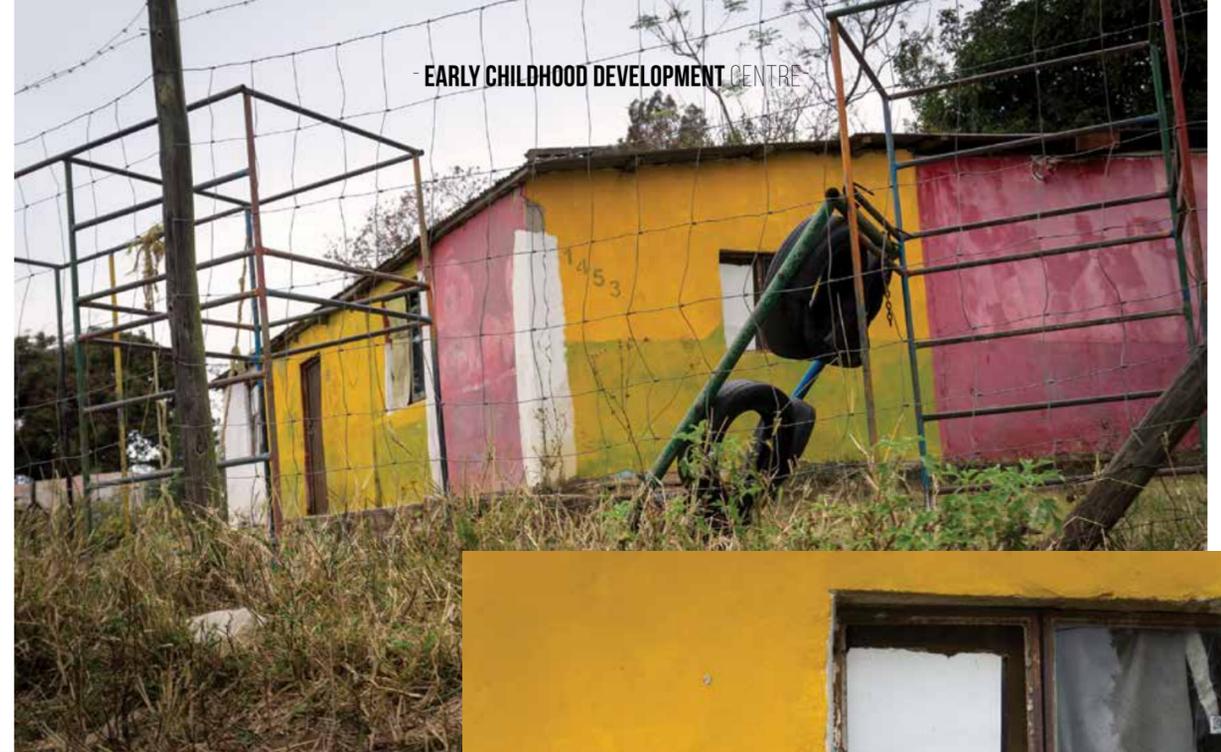
mental health. Roughly 80% of brain development is completed by age three and 90% by age five. This means a child cannot wait for primary school for learning to begin.

It is a child's basic right to education, to thrive and not only survive. And ensuring the healthy cognitive, social and emotional development of young children should be the highest priority on the agenda for government, business, churches, communities and individuals, in order to raise healthy children worldwide.

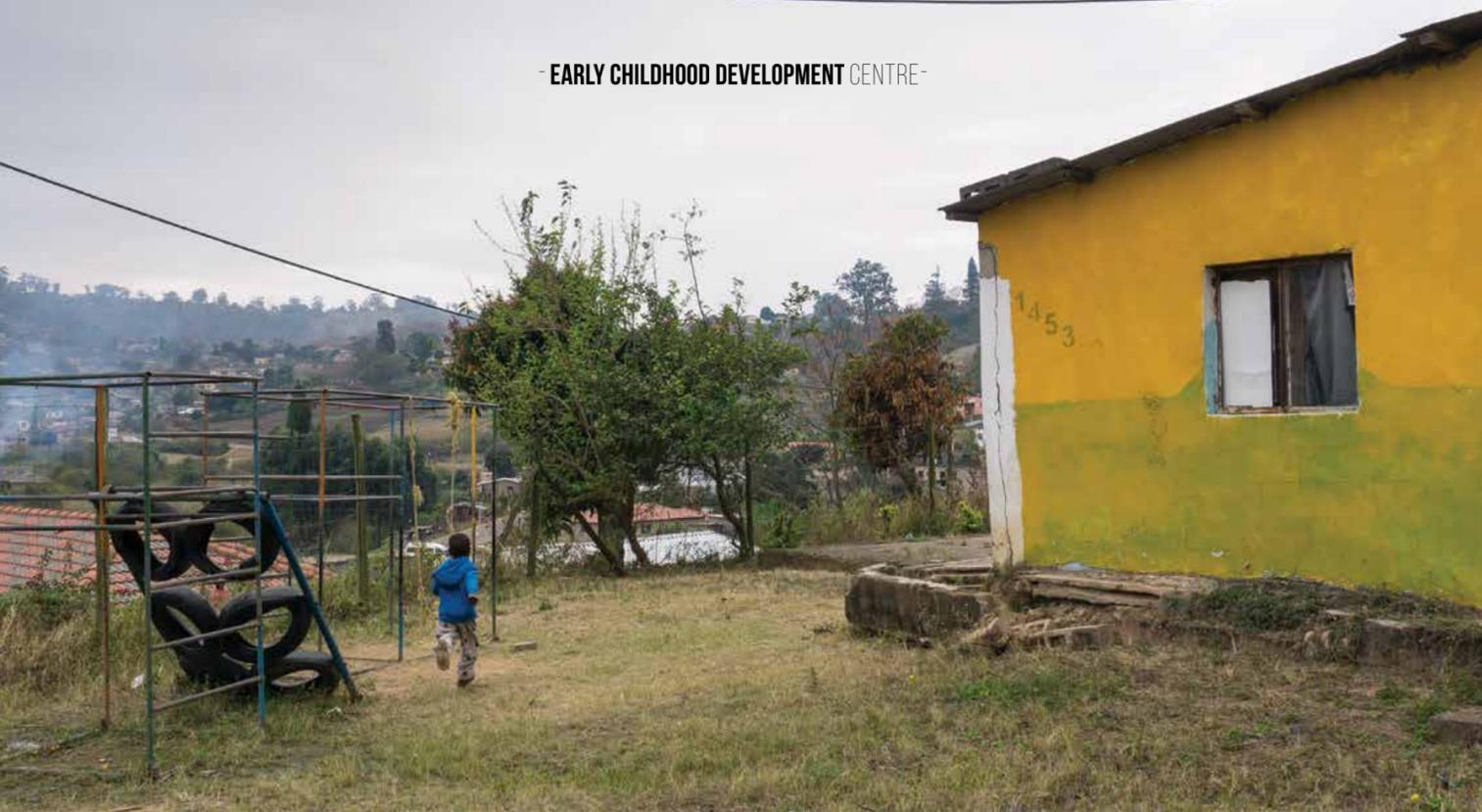
"IT IS EASIER TO BUILD STRONG CHILDREN THAN TO REPAIR BROKEN ADULTS"

- Frederick Douglass.

As we travel even higher into the hills of Inanda... "These are not baby-sitting services. Children are not just brought here to be kept safe", explains Zanele. "Proper active learning and milestone stimulation takes place". Pressed on her passion for learning, she tells us that she has a heart for children and is convicted to change the rural narrative of peri-urban education. When pushed a little harder on her motivation, Zanele dreams of creating a model ECD for others to follow including facilities for a counselling/medical centre for traumatised and abused children and an enterprise hub to upskill unemployed parents, caregivers and family members to build better families. "Children who go through well-structured ECD programmes are given such an advantage as they are better equipped to shine in their primary, secondary and tertiary education", offers Zanele.



"WE ARE BIG THINKING, GIANT-SLAYING RISK-TAKERS WHO GIVE UP THINGS WE LOVE, FOR THINGS WE LOVE MORE – LIKE SMART AND HEALTHY LITTLE CHILDREN WHO WILL LEAD US INTO TOMORROW"



“EDUCATION IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON BY WHICH YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD” - Nelson Madela



There were many unattended, very young children on the streets of Inanda that morning. When Nelson Madela said “Education is the most powerful weapon by which you can change the world”, he definitely had these youngest and most impressionable minds as the starting point.

Arriving outside the gate to the Smanethemba ECD, we were welcomed by owner Mrs Zinhle Mthiyane. Sadly there were no children in the school grounds but we could feel their spirit. A neat collection of used building blocks and toys sat patiently alongside the wall, their presence belying the powerful teaching that takes place under this tin roof. Evidence of routine is everywhere - laminated alphabet and word charts, pictures and timetables line the walls and everything is allocated into a particular space.

Once our eyes had adjusted to the unlit room, the discussion turned to child nutrition. “Not all of these children are fed at home before coming to pre-school” says Zanele. The Domino Foundation’s Nutrition Programme provides carefully

selected protein packed porridge and meals in partnership with partners and the owners with the emphasis on “food for thought”. Evidence shows that inadequate nutrition and the physical and emotional stress of living in poverty reduces grey matter in children in the frontal and temporal cortex and the hippocampus. This all points to the well-known effects of poverty on academic outcomes. More than just a social problem, lack of early childhood development is also a biomedical problem.

Here again the strategic intention of the Domino Foundation’s mission into social justice, nutrition and education plays itself out in their pledge to reduce child malnutrition in school by feeding over 13,500 learners a month. They provide meals in partner crèches, ECD’s and primary and high schools and short term Relief Aid to families in crisis. “Our vision is to feed the hungry in their most desperate time of need. As the number of volunteers and donors grow, we move closer to realising our dream of communities where no child is too hungry to concentrate and learn”.

Walking around the Smanethemba ECD, it became alarmingly evident that there is a rapidly growing gap between what parents are paying for the ECDC service and the required minimum standards of infrastructure and facilities. “What has become very apparent and of big concern in the COVID pandemic is the lack of parental commitment and engagement in their child’s education”. With the car windows open, our camera randomly recorded large groups of children playing amongst the rubble and rubbish piling up in the gutters and against buildings. They appeared happy and carefree, but at 11am in the morning, many were still wearing pyjamas and we wondered about the effects of non-existent routines, learning opportunities, absent parents and what were they going to eat for lunch?

SADLY GOVERNMENT FUNDING IS NOT GUARANTEED, SO ECDC’S RESORT TO CREATING ADDITIONAL INCOME STREAMS TO KEEP GOING.

The whole car burst into raucous laughter as we fantasised about starting a tour bus company with Alfred as the main guide. His knowledge of Inanda and connection to this community is extraordinarily inspiring.

The tools of Early Childhood Development are simple if colourful. Their power lies in their ability to engage the little minds with sufficient repetition to establish routine - an essential building block into adulthood. Cognitive as well as physical and emotional faculties are assessed, monitored and developed within the ECD 150 Tool (a Monitoring and Evaluation Assessment Tool developed by The Domino Foundation in-house). “Among the many assessments we carry out is their ability to cross the midline” Zanele informs us. “And jumping” is categorised as a significant Gross Motor Skill for good growth and brain development and we know how much fun children can have with a simple rope and a few friends!

Besides a child’s physical safety, care and basic nutrition, we don’t believe any other step in education is going to make as great an impact on our country as a renewed and collective commitment to Early Childhood Development. The Domino Foundation initiatives are geared towards affecting sustainable, social change in the nation by empowering communities to help themselves.



At first glance, the values that drive The Foundation appear unconventional. On closer inspection, who wouldn’t be curious about the implications of: “We are big thinking, giant-slaying risk-takers who give up things we love, for things we love more – like smart and healthy little children who will lead us into tomorrow”

Go to www.dominofoundation.org.za for more information on how to engage your conviction on improving the landscape of education in Durban and beyond with The Domino Foundation.

