

Letting the Sun Shine on All



Effective support for ECD practitioners means effective support for all learners

The parent meeting was scheduled for 7 pm; however, with an icy wind swirling up the fine sand all around Delft, and serious rain threatening, I wasn't holding my breath for a good turnout! How wrong I was. Breastfeeding mums, hoodied dads, track-suited grandpas and rugged up grannies – they all came. We crammed into the 3-4 year old classroom, our close proximity protecting us from the chilly wind whistling through the garage door. Sunshine Educare is an ECD centre in Delft, which for the past six months has resembled a building site.

Her staff was feeling a bit apprehensive and unsure about how to handle young Hope, who has CP.

The centre first opened on 1 February 2010, when Lora, the principal, decided to take care of two children, accommodating them in her lounge. Two weeks later, the number had increased to fifteen and she got her daughter in to assist her. The numbers just grew and grew, resulting in Lora renting a Wendy House close to home and employing another teacher. As more and more parents approached Lora to accept their children, she realised she would need bigger premises. She and her husband decided to build onto their existing home and have the crèche downstairs and their living space above. Renovations started in 2016, but because of the inclement weather and a couple of other factors, Sunshine remains an area under construction.

I first met Lora, the principal, a year ago, as she was one of the students at Northlink College, who participated in IESA's inclusion training for the best part of 2016. At the end of the course, Lora approached me and asked whether IESA would be able to assist the other Sunshine staff members by doing our intensive training at her centre. They had recently accepted a young learner with cerebral palsy and her staff was feeling a bit apprehensive and unsure about how to handle young Hope. After an extensive interview with Lora and an initial meeting with her staff, I agreed to take Sunshine Educare on, as one of my ECD centres funded by DSD. In terms of ticking the "Inclusive boxes", I was taking quite a risk. Being a building site, the environment isn't particularly accessible to all children, nor is it especially welcoming, with few posters on the walls, furniture wrapped in plastic and building rubble clearly visible. However, the work they are doing with Hope prompted me to stick to my decision. And I wasn't wrong.

Hope is 4 years old and prior to coming to Sunshine, had not been to an ECD facility. Her granny, who is her main carer, approached Lora and asked whether Sunshine would be prepared to accept Hope for mornings only. She was worried that Hope, apart from not being exposed to formal early learning opportunities, had also not had many opportunities to socialize. Lora agreed, her teachers however,

Hope's independence has increased.

were very reluctant; in fact, one of the teachers confessed that she was a little bit frightened of Hope, as she had no idea how to deal with her. Needless to say, everybody including Hope, was a tad nervous on day one! Lora, because of her knowledge of inclusive education, had prepared the other children for Hope's arrival and they were all wonderfully accommodating. Hope, understandably, was a little overcome by her new surroundings and spent her first few weeks sitting in her pushchair just observing the goings on. She had to be carried to the toilet and the teachers had to feed her.

The children have accepted Hope unconditionally.

As time progressed and both Hope and her teachers relaxed, her independence increased. She now insists on doing most things for herself, including

crawling to the line as the children prepare for their toilet routine, and she readily takes part in all the classroom activities. The children have accepted Hope unconditionally. In fact, during morning ring when the children would usually stand up for an activity, they insist on staying seated so that Hope can be included. Her granny attended the parent meeting and commented on the incredible difference in Hope since she has been attending the Centre. She is more communicative, is excited to go to school in the mornings and refuses to sit in her pushchair, opting instead to be placed on the mat in the classroom.

After the parent meeting, another parent, who has a two year old with a visual impairment, approached Lora and asked whether Sunshine would be willing to accept her daughter. She had thought that because her child was visually impaired an ECD centre wouldn't be able to accommodate her. She was so inspired by what Hope's granny had shared about Hope's progress that she plucked up the courage to enquire about Sunshine accepting her daughter. Lora has agreed and the young learner joined the Centre at the beginning of September.

I have come to realise, through working with Sunshine Educentre, that despite not being able to tick all the "inclusive boxes", there are many other boxes, which can indeed be ticked. In Hope's case, to cite just a few:

- Families' visions of a typical life for their children can come true;
- All children deserve a chance to develop a positive understanding of themselves and others;
- Friendships develop when children are able to socialise;
- All children learn by being together and are empowered to deal with life, by an increase in self-respect and confidence.

Thank you, Hope – you were so aptly named!

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