



Community Project Showcase

iThemba Projects: A Stellar Example

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Abstract

iThemba Projects works in the misty hills of kwaMpumuza, commonly known as Sweetwaters, in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, South Africa. What started as a church initiative, has grown into a multifaceted project based on the premise of ‘community for the community’. The interventions developed at iThemba Projects not only uplift the community but also facilitate the growth within the community in a self-sustaining manner. This showcase article aims to evaluate and promote the ideas and interventions used by the iThemba Projects to inform researchers, stakeholders, and community workers so that future research, interventions, and projects can follow the success of the iThemba Projects.

Keywords: communities, interventions, iThemba Projects, early childhood development, mentoring, nutrition, construction.

iThemba Projects Webpage:

<https://ithembaprojects.com>

Introduction

As explained by Visser (2012a), community interventions should be developed and implemented in a manner that does not facilitate learnt helplessness but fosters initiative, collaboration, and accountability within the community. In an overview written by iThemba Projects (2023), the first sentence states: “Handouts don’t fix poverty” (p. 1). This boldly claims the ethos and mentality behind this intervention, where sustainability and community-led projects are at the fore.

iThemba Projects partners with the kwaMpumuzu community (also known as Sweetwaters), a semi-rural community about five km from Hilton, KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa (iThemba Projects, 2017). According to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC, 2021), Sweetwaters form part of the Msunduzi municipality, which includes the city of Pietermaritzburg. The community of Mpumuzu has a population range between 50 000 and 60 000 people, with a majority of the population consisting of youth and children (iThemba Projects, 2017). The community is surrounded by rolling hills and vegetation; however, in deep contrast to the surrounding beauty, the people of Sweetwaters face several challenges and inequalities, such as unemployment, poverty, poor housing, and limited access to basic services and infrastructure (iThemba Projects, 2017).

On a theoretical level, iThemba Projects lays the firm foundation on community psychology principles that ensure the success of community intervention programmes. The grassroots project focuses its values and interventions on education within the community: from early childhood development to mentoring and life skills-based programmes. The ripple effect from which this project flows impacts the community on multiple levels, from the micro- or individual-level to the macro, systemic level.

From Humble Beginnings

iThemba Projects started as an initiative by a church where a need in the community was identified. What started as small activities with women and children, grew in scope as, through interaction with community leaders and members, a need for more intervention activities was identified. A full-time staff member was, in 2006, appointed to further develop the work and coordinate volunteers. The community expressed the need for assistance in education, specifically with a focus on early childhood education (ECD). In 2007, iThemba was donated a piece of ground by the local chief, Inkosi Zondi, which was earmarked for the development of a community centre and a new preschool. The iThemba Trust was also established during this period, and in 2008 iThemba Projects fell under the umbrella of the iThemba Trust. In 2009, valuable input from community expert Dr Francis Wamui Njoroge (Global University for Lifelong Learning, n.d.) led to a change in iThemba’s approach to community work. With Dr Njoroge’s help, a better understanding of the importance of sustainability, and a newly adopted philosophy of community engagement, the iThemba team set out to partner with the community in community-led, sustainable projects. Today, iThemba Projects focuses on four pillars that include youth mentoring, early childhood development (ECD), nutrition, and construction (iThemba Projects, 2017).

Youth Mentoring

iThemba Projects (2017) provides children with positive, caring adult role models. These role models (mentors) engage with the children and adolescents through a variety of programmes throughout the week - “doing life” with them, being there for them, and providing that one special person they can talk to.

The mentoring programmes include Life Groups, where school learners get together in the community, a place where they feel that they belong and have fun with friends. Furthermore, the mentors dedicate special one-on-one visits to children’s homes with a focus on long-term mentorship and personal support. They teach life skills based on the South African National Curriculum (CAPS) to grade 7-9 school learners on a weekly basis. These life skills encapsulate positive life outcomes that foster positive relationships to ensure successful life choices.

Every year, 50 kids and 50 teens are taken to camps to escape the daily pressures of life and enjoy activities that stimulate a safe environment for kids to open up about their personal well-being. The Kids Club also provides a safe environment where kids have fun on Fridays. These activities are all based on the Christian model of discipleship (iThemba Projects, 2023).

Additionally, the Year of Your Life Programme (YOYL) was created to address the lack of opportunities and support for post-matrices who have very little to look forward to after school. This programme allows these individuals to volunteer in the community and assist and shadow a mentor from one of the different projects, be it Youth Mentoring, ECD, or Nutrition. Furthermore, the students in the YOYL Programme are also provided with the opportunity to develop different skills such as budgeting, learning to swim, attending computer courses, art courses, and more.

Early Childhood Development

A prime example of Bronfenbrenner’s theory (Antony, 2022) would be the preschool-level child programmes integrated within iThemba Projects. These programmes focus on the immediate and surrounding environments to foster a system that is conducive to ECD. Teachers and parents are educated on how best to provide for the child’s developmental needs. This includes curriculum implementation, training, and one-on-one mentoring for teachers and parents. The child would directly benefit from the ECD programme where quality education and appropriate stimulation are available. This creates a solid foundation for the future of the child. The three-fold programme addresses the classroom-related challenges, including teachers’ development, learning at home, encouraging parents and caregivers to engage in their child’s development, as well as building environments that are conducive to learning owing to the demand for ECD programmes. The two ECD programmes include the Site-Based (Asidlale Programme) and Home-Based (ECHS: Early Childhood Home Stimulation). Firstly, the Site-Based (Asidlale Programme) allows ECD practitioners to individually mentor teachers (most schools receive weekly visits) and teachers can also buy resources through an incentive-based programme. In 2023, there were 569 site-based visits by the iThemba ECD team. Furthermore, throughout the year, workshops (Hlanganani “Come Together” Teas) are facilitated, and teachers share classroom practices and resources. In 2023, there were six geographical groups and a total of 45 Hlanganani teas hosted throughout the year (iThemba, 2024a). The annual assessment of Grade R learners indicates an increased preparedness for primary school where teachers are part of the programme (iThemba, 2024b). Secondly, the Home-Based (ECHS: Early Childhood Home Stimulation) stimulates the interaction between children and parents/caregivers

at home while focusing on the importance of ECD. Parents prepare homemade educational resources and have access to the toy-lending library. The programme is monitored by community mentors and is crucial for the ECD of children who do not attend preschool education. In 2023, there were 3665 home visits in the community with nine ECD home-based learning programme team members. The number of Fundanathi events increased from 59 in 2022 to 162 in 2023. At these events, of which there was an 83% attendance rate, caregivers and children came together to play (iThemba, 2024b). These Fundanathi events help build bonds between caregivers and their children.

With a research grant from the John Templeton Foundation (*Virtuous Hope: Building Resilient iThemba through Stories and Actions – JTF grant 62596*), researchers from Hope College in the United States of America, in conjunction with iThemba staff, study the virtue of hope amongst caregivers in the context of hardship and community from a positive psychology perspective (Thomas et al., 2023). In their study, Thomas et al. (2023) maintain that virtuous hope involves the “pursuit of realizing a particular vision of the common good with intention and action, often growing out of adversity and shaped in relation to other people and the transcendent” (p. 188). Furthermore, Thomas et al. (2023) highlight that virtuous hope is necessary for social change. Moreover, the iThemba Hope Scale was developed and implemented, in conjunction with other surveys, in homes every six months to assess the efficacy of the interventions (iThemba Projects (2024b).

Sustainable Nutrition

As a result of the aftermath of apartheid and other inequalities, most of the community members are unemployed and thus rely on social grants as a means of income (iThemba Projects, 2017). In addition, most of the Sweetwaters population are minors and need adequate education and nutrition. As cited by the Sustainable Development Goals and the DG Murray Trust in iThemba Projects (2024a), “27% of South African children under the age of five are stunted, and a rich learning environment is useless if a child’s brain does not have the nutrition it needs” (p. 2). The nutrition project aims to fight stunting in Sweetwaters through permaculture food gardens in schools and homes to supplement children’s nutrition in a sustainable way. This is done through productive permaculture gardens at 31 local schools, where there is a focus on sustainable organic produce, with overproduce being sold to generate additional income. The gardens are nurtured by local volunteers and additional education and training are provided to the community on sustainable gardening. The seedling nursery provides seedlings to the local schools and community, with seedlings also being sold locally. Additionally, home gardens, of which there were 418 in 2023, empower families to provide themselves with sustainable nutrition (iThemba Projects, 2024b).

Construction

The aphorism: “Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu”, which can be translated as “a person is a person because of or through others”, encapsulates the identity, functioning, and ethos of iThemba Projects (Moloketi, 2009 & Tutu, 2004 as cited in Haaga, 2022, p. 104). This project epitomises the spirit of Ubuntu, where interconnection and interdependence are the hallmarks of the African worldview. This not only alludes to the interrelationships of the people in the community but also to the relationship between people and their environment. There is a strong connection between the community and their environment. iThemba promotes environmentally friendly and sustainable practices, such as permaculture gardens, and also develops infrastructure in an environmentally friendly manner, such as the iThemba Lamampumuza Community Centre.

Rammed earth wall technology is used in the building process, where soil and lime are compacted into a framework. Additionally, this building method is cost-effective and requires minimal maintenance compared to other construction methods (Ciancio & Beckett, 2013). Moreover, this project upskills community members in additional skills such as plumbing, tiling, and electrics (iThemba, 2024a). Thus, it not only aligns with the main goal of sustainability and growth of iThemba Projects but also with the philosophy of African worldview.

From a Theoretical Approach

Systems Theory

iThemba Projects specifically has a strong foundation in the systems theory perspective. As reiterated by Visser (2012b), the systems theory is the interconnection of levels in a multidimensional way. These contexts, or systems, can be social, historical, cultural, and political. Moreover, these systems can be related to the levels of “intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy” (Trickett, 2019, p. 205). As shown by the community's needs and the growth of the various projects within the community, upliftment is evident on various systemic levels. As reiterated by Naidoo et al. (2008), interdisciplinary work enhances the meaning and understanding of community psychology and the complexity of community life, including the sociocultural dimension.

Social Constructionism

The intervention also encompasses some elements of social constructionism in which the needs of the community are addressed and solved by the community itself. Social constructionism is based on the assumption that experts do not have all the answers and that community work is not bound by normative ideas (Du Preez & Eskell-Blokland, 2012). In this case, iThemba Projects is driven by the ever-changing needs of the community and strives to build accountability within the community, where fostering change is the responsibility of each community member.

Critical Approach

The critical approach focuses on the idea that intervention cannot be viewed as objective or scientific per se but takes on a political stance where social and economic factors are considered when community needs are assessed. To fully understand the needs of the community, as well as the understanding of the community of Sweetwaters as a whole, a critical approach to viewing the community intervention is required. As explained by Parker (2007), “critical psychological research is the ability of human beings to change” (p. 13). An example of this includes nutrition and construction programmes where community members learn pragmatic skills that can help them gain employment and contribute to the economy.

A Call for Research

As shown by the growth in this community, doing more research on iThemba Projects and other community interventions will help address the chasm identified in the implementation of community interventions within the South African context. Linking back to the theoretical aspects of this intervention, appropriate research will further benefit how the system, i.e., the community, can adapt to constant change and maintain stability, ensuring that progress is made (Visser, 2012a). This reflexive and change-orientated approach would inform parties of the change created within the community, and structure models that can be used and implemented by other communities both near and far.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article have no conflict of interest to declare.

Author Contributions

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