



The single best investment to make in our future **By Allister Sparks**

In the endless debates about our many critical issues, poor education, youth unemployment, shortage of skills, the wealth gap, the crime rate, dysfunctional social behaviour, somehow we seldom hear a word about the single most vital factor that connects them all -- the nurturing of small children during their most formative years, under the age of six.

We send them to primary school when they are six, but by then they have already passed the most developmentally important years of any human being's life.

Perhaps they have been nurtured with loving and creative care through those important years, so that they will grow up to be secure, self-assured, successful students, good parents and stable members of society.

Or perhaps they will not. For we are a damaged society. Damaged by the trauma of generations of being denigrated by apartheid, and damaged by the guilt of having inflicted that denigration on others.

Damaged by the slave mentality and the baas mentality; by the squalor of poverty and the injustice of gross inequality. Damaged, too, by the fact that too many of our children have been, and still are being, damaged by parents who were themselves unknowingly damaged by those factors.

Thrusting a child of six into "big school" with all those disadvantages is surely in itself also damaging. Small wonder our failure rate is so devastating.

Studies by many specialists are showing with increasing certainty that those early years in a child's life are the most crucial in shaping an individual's personality development. Miss them, and any deficiency is likely to increase in later life. That is why children from abusive or dysfunctional homes are likely to grow up to be abusive and dysfunctional themselves.

"Early childhood is the most effective time to prevent inequalities before disparities widen," writes Anthony Lake, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). "By investing in children in early childhood, there are lifetime consequences not only for individuals but for the wellbeing of societies."

Our government spends millions on education. It has produced an educational system that is one of the most expensive in the world, yielding one of the world's worst results. There are many reasons for this, which this column has dealt with frequently before, but I believe one of the major reasons is right here -- the neglect of pre-school education in a country that needs it perhaps more desperately than any other.

The government knows this. It has good early childhood education policies, but like so much else it is not implementing them. Trevor Manuel's National Planning Commission has recognised the value of early childhood education and recommended a two-year programme for every child, from age four; perhaps the Zuma administration will get around to doing something about that before Jesus Christ comes again.

Part of the problem is that this issue appears to fall between the government's multiple stools. Children under the five don't fall under the Department of Basic Education, but under the Department of Social Development. So those who don't get a place in the relatively few (mostly Model C) schools that have a Grade R, but only begin at age six, seven or later, end up in an administrative no-man's land.

Thousands end up in unregistered creches or "baby farms" where working mothers drop them for the day out of necessity. The staff there are unqualified, ranging from hopelessly inadequate to eager but untutored in what is a specialised occupation requiring keen sensitivity and knowledgeable observation. There are scores of such unregistered schools around South Africa.

These are the future South Africans who should be getting specialised professional pre-school attention. If they were, a whole range of dysfunctional social and educational problems would be eased, if not completely solved. A whole generation would be saved from the accumulated ravages of our history. But it is not happening.

So here's a suggestion. In the Johannesburg suburb of Kew, bordering on teeming Alexandra township, is a remarkable institution founded 12 years ago by two practising psychologists, Tony and Hillary Hamburger, who wanted to apply their professional skills to help the many people, especially children, who had been traumatised by the violence of the anti-apartheid struggle in Alexandra.

Converting vacant industrial premises that Tony Hamburger happened to own in Kew, the man-and-wife team established a psychotherapy training organisation to help these casualties of Alexandra's struggle, compounded after 1990 by the AIDS pandemic which ravaged families and left many children alone and in desperate circumstances.

They named it Ububele, an Nguni word meaning succouring or nurturing, and it soon became apparent to the founders that these emotionally traumatised children were the most in need of their services. The children in turn provided the psychologists with a direct connection to the community in Alexandra where they could conduct research and gain a deeper understanding of the conditions afflicting the people there.

Over the 12 years Ububele has evolved into a unique institution, not only treating individual cases but developing programmes and training course for dealing with the emotional development and psychological support of pre-school children.

Crisply put, it is a training organisation with a strong therapeutic culture.

A visit there is an uplifting experience. Classes of animated four-year-olds, under the guidance of skilled teachers, interact with great enthusiasm and self-confidence in group games, plays and other creative activities. Elsewhere in the building psychologists, sometimes interns, engage one-on-one with troubled children in cubicles that have one-way mirrors through which

specialists can monitor a child's reactions.

"Small children can't articulate their problems," Hillary Hamburger explains, "but they can play them." So their problems can be diagnosed by analysing what they do while interacting with the therapist.

The results are evident to any visitor. And they are having a ripple effect across society. "Ububele has made an important footprint in the mental health of Gauteng," is the pithy observation of Jake Matlhong, its oldest staff member.

But there is a problem. What began as a gesture of compassion has swelled into a consuming obligation for the founders. The overwhelming need in the community they are serving is crushing them personally and financially. They have established a trust -- The Ububele Educational and Psychotherapy Trust -- but raising funds is time-consuming and difficult, especially in these tight economic times. Government support has been small and sporadic and petered out without reason last year. They have had no response to their application to the Lotto in over 10 months, despite that body's shamefully extravagant donations elsewhere.

Closure of what should be a working model for similar institutions across the land is now threatening.

What the government should do is help fund the running of Ububele on a regular basis to enable it to conduct training courses, which it has already designed, for the thousands of unqualified teachers working in unregistered "baby farms" around the country. As it is Ububele has managed to train 500 teachers and childcare workers in its 12 years; that should be boosted to 5,000 by the end of 2012.

The cost to the education budget would be infinitesimal; the returns immeasurable.

It would be hard to think of any small investment that could make such a major difference on so many fronts to the long-term prospects of this under-performing country.

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