




Chapter 8

Children's ministry in a township with reference to early childhood development

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1. Introduction

Some of Mangaung's local congregations are involved in early childhood development (ECD) programmes of one form or another. These congregations are part of other stakeholders and role players in this sector. These include the government through the Department of Social Development, the local Municipality, NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and private individuals. The Department of Education (DOE) (2001) defines ECD as "the process by which children from birth to nine years of age grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally and socially." Atmore et al. (2012:122) regard ECD as a foundation for future learning and therefore believe that quality ECD programmes are critical in terms of preparing children for adulthood by providing them with opportunities that they need to succeed in all areas

of life. In the early childhood development space, local congregations may offer a unique service that distinguishes them from other role players and stakeholders in this sphere.

Unlike other organisations and social institutions, congregations have a unique mission calling to be the salt and light of the world (Matt 5:13-14). Therefore, they should approach child care and ECD from a different perspective from other entities. In support of this view, Myers (1999:127) says that unlike other organisations, congregations can make several critical contributions to the transformational development agenda in society. In everything the church undertakes, its mission should always be to advance the kingdom of God and bring light and taste in darkness and insipidity and this would include the formation and development of children.

Concerning ECD, townships in the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality are swamped by a myriad of socio-economic challenges that manifest themselves in the form of inadequate access to healthcare, education, social services and nutrition, amongst others (Atmore et al., 2012:122) and for obvious reasons, these challenges have a significant effect on the well-being and development of young children. Young children depend on either parents or guardians for almost everything. If those are destitute, unemployed, or abuse alcohol or substances, the children suffer as a result. The focus of ECD is to address these challenges from an early age. If this is not undertaken in the children's lives, it has the potential to stifle their development in almost all areas of their lives and development as adults.

A missional framework, as a theoretical framework, directs the calling and ministry of the church and congregations. Saayman (2010:5) states that the church should be missional in its approach to conducting its ministry. According to Bosch (1991:413), the mission of the church is two-pronged, one spiritual and the other social. Given this, the church should preach the gospel while becoming involved in practical ways to solve the community's social ills. In this regard, Pillay (2015:4) advises the church to first "understand the context, analyze the situation, gather facts, and do its research - sometimes teaming up with others in this endeavour." The church and congregations should adopt the same approach and framework in their involvement in ECD while maintaining its uniqueness. According to Hermans and Schoeman (2015:9), practical theology starts with

practical concerns and contributes to practice. This research is a result of a practical theological concern regarding the role that congregations may play through their children's ministry and ECD centres in a township context. The concern is whether these congregations were running them in terms of *Missio Dei*, thereby making a unique contribution that no other organisation was making? The research also reflected on the ECD practices undertaken by congregations in a township context and ways to identify best practices for them.

Various role players in ECD approach it from different perspectives. Dominant perspectives in this regard include the following: scientific-biological perspective, social-economic, human rights or political and community development perspectives, amongst others (Woodhead, 2006:4; Shonkoff & Richmond, 2009:1-3; Biersteker, 2012:52; Van der Westhuizen et al., 2019:2). Different ECD providers, whether aware or not, align themselves with one or more of the perspectives mentioned above.

This chapter focuses on the following question: What contribution can a congregation make in early childhood development? The research sought to establish the unique contribution that congregations are making in the community through early childhood development.

2. Research methodology

The research employed a qualitative research methodology; was inductive in its approach and data was collected from three congregations in Mangaung Township that were purposively selected (Babie & Mouton, 2001:309). The selected congregations are located in different geographical areas around Mangaung Township that had similar social and economic challenges. Two congregations ran formal and registered ECDs while the other one had an informal and unregistered ECD. The formal ECDs had proper infrastructure, and registered programmes, and most of their personnel had received ECD training. On the contrary, the informal ECD lacked proper infrastructure and trained personnel. The ECD was not registered with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

Data was collected through in-depth interviews with pastors of the three selected congregations. Data was collected using structured open-ended interview questions. The purpose of open-ended questions was to allow the pastors to provide elaborate answers. The pastors' responses were recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes. Themes were highlighted and inductively coded, and thereafter grouped (De Vos et al., 2011:308). The grouped codes were referred to as categories.

The categories were allocated names linking them to the main research question. The categories were named programmes or projects, role of congregation and unique contribution. Programmes or projects referred to the type of ECD. For example, pre-school, crèche and day-care centre. The role of a congregation implies the perceived mission of the congregations in the communities it is based in. Unique contribution referred to a specific act or actions that a congregation was performing in the community through the ECD centre that it believed set it apart as a Christian entity compared to other organisation(s) that render similar services. The coding and network categories were made using the Atlas.Ti software program.

3. Findings and reflections

This section focuses on findings from the analysis of the interviews with the three pastors¹ of the township congregations. Three themes were identified to reflect upon: the programmes or projects that the congregations have, the role that they play in the communities concerning ECD, and thirdly, the unique contribution that they are making in the communities through ECD.

3.1 Programmes and projects

The three congregations all ran crèches. Congregation 1 ran a programme called PEPE Network. According to pastor 1, "The idea of the PEPE network is to help churches reach out to the community through the children especially disadvantaged kids and we have this crèche it is not necessarily a normal crèche it is a centre whereby we get kids from

1 For confidentiality, the pastors were referred to as Pastors 1, 2 and 3 for the first, second and third congregation respectively.

communities and then we reach out to the parents through these kids.” The pastor indicated that the crèche trains the children to be better people within the communities and provides them with two meals a day while charging them a minimal fee. He furthermore said the purpose of the crèche was two-pronged. It was to assist children from families who could not afford expensive fees to reach the community with the gospel, using children who attended the ECD centre.

According to Pastor 2, congregation 2 had two programmes, namely, Sunday school and a crèche. Sunday school targeted primary school children aged 6 to 13 years of age. Its purpose was to teach its members' children the congregation's dogma. On the other hand, the crèche targeted all the children aged 0 to 5 years of age from the community, not considering their social background and religious affiliation.

Pastor 3, on the other hand, indicated that they had a crèche which targeted children aged 2 to 5 years. According to the pastor, the purpose of the crèche was to educate the community's children in an attempt to contribute towards community development. It intended to help children from families of unemployed parents with a cheaper and safer environment. Figure 1 depicts the ECD programmes that the congregations had.

In conclusion, the programmes for the three congregations involved crèches and a Sunday school. These were used to (1) Train the children to be better people within the communities and alleviate hunger by feeding the children, (2) Provide all children from poor families access to cheaper early childhood education in a safer environment, and (3) Reach the communities with the gospel using children who attend their ECD centres. The Sunday school targeted primary school children of the congregation's members to teach them the congregation's doctrine.

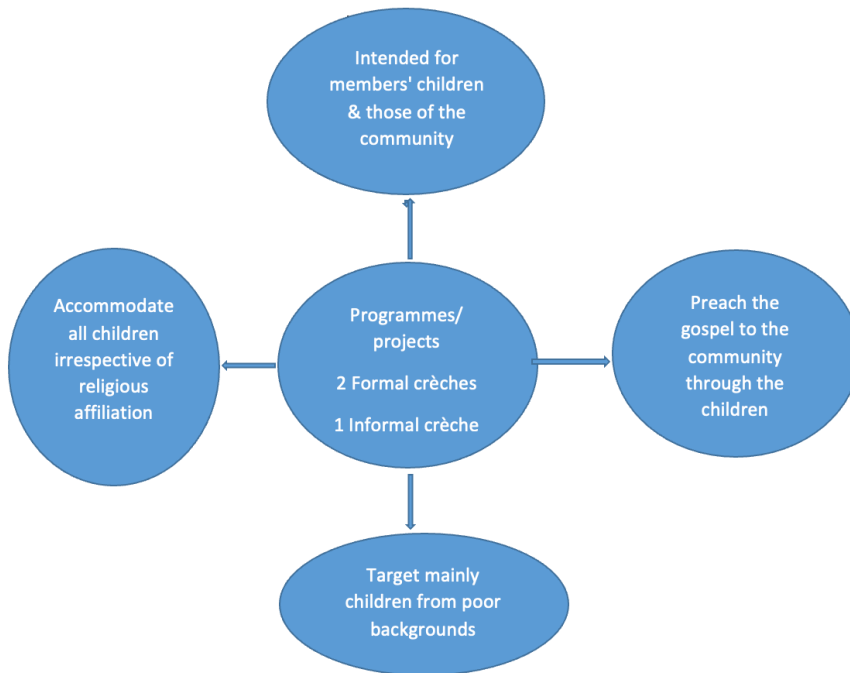


Figure 1: Programmes or projects of the congregations

3.2 *The role of the congregation in the community*

Pastor 1 regarded the role of his congregation’s ECD in the community as offering children an education that encouraged better social and spiritual development. He said, “Our vision is to promote and prepare them (children) for primary schools and (that) they grow with those values of Christianity or the Bible as we are more Bible-based in training them as well, but we do integrate the normal training of reading, naming animals and all those things.” According to Pastor 1, the congregation’s role in the community through its ECD was to socially uplift its children by offering them education and grounding the children spiritually in Christian values.

According to Pastor 2, the church's role through ECD in the community was to build children morally, spiritually and otherwise. The pastor believed that their ECD should teach children morality. He said, "As the church, we take the church and their (children) families as the small church." The church expected that first, members would bring their children to the congregations' crèche for holistic development; that is, morally, spiritually and otherwise, and second, the children and their families would embody the church's teachings and thus become a "small church".

Regarding the role of the congregation through its ECD, pastor 3 believed that it was to ensure that children attending their ECD grew healthily and spiritually formed because if this is not performed early on in their lives, their morals would be negatively affected later on in their lives when they were grown up. Pastor 3: "We sort of try to consider the question of nutrition which is very important especially in our poverty-stricken areas so we would expect each member of the congregation and the community at large to send their kids to the crèche." The pastor is of the view that if children's faith is not built from an early stage, this tends to have a negative impact concerning their morals. They tend to have poor moral judgement later in life. The congregation, therefore, see its role as either forming the children's faith or influencing their religious beliefs early on in life.

Figure 2 explains, in summary, the role of congregations through ECD.

In conclusion, the three pastors regarded the role of their congregations through their respective ECDs as to: first, offer education that encourages better social and spiritual development and inculcate Christian values; second, contribute to poverty alleviation and help children experience better (quality) growth and form their faith; and third, build children holistically (morally, spiritually and otherwise).

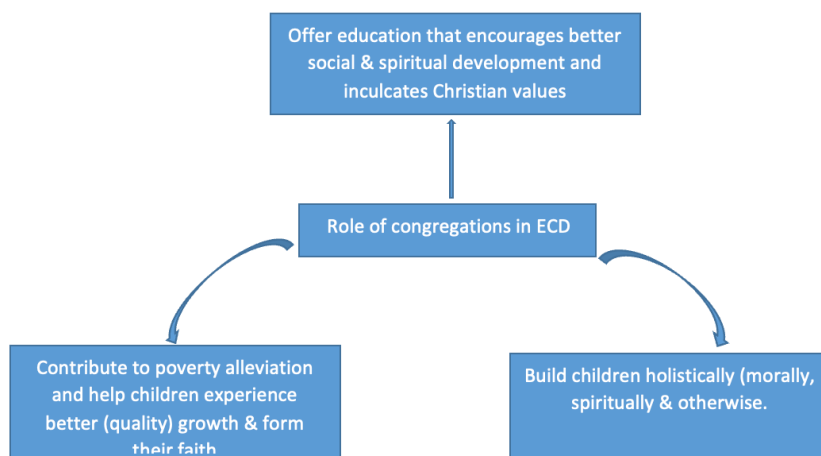


Figure 2: The role of congregations through ECD

3.3 *Unique contribution made by the congregations*

The first congregation believed that they were making a unique contribution to ECD in five ways; namely, charging minimal fees, alleviating poverty by providing children with meals, training the teacher and giving her a stipend, teaching children Christian values, and building relationships with the children’s parents which enables them to preach the gospel to them.

Regarding charging minimal fees, Pastor 1 said, “Most of these kids honestly speaking cannot afford to go to our ‘normal’ pre-schools whereby we find a ‘normal’ pre-school charges R1,200.00 per child (per month), so in this one, they can pay as little as R100.00 and the church subsidises towards the well-being like the cleanliness of the yard to the cleanliness of the place where the kids are developed.” Indeed, the ECD centre was engaging with the community to ensure that it educates children at its own cost. If it was for profit, it would not survive.

Concerning poverty alleviation, the pastor said that the ECD provided children with breakfast and lunch whenever they attended classes. Providing meals to children living in areas such as this plays a critical role in their lives and development. The ECD centre is situated in an area characterised by

many RDP houses and shacks, and a significant number of its residents are either grant recipients or are self-employed. The pastor emphasised the importance of providing children with two meals a day and said, "There is one thing that I can say, food is one of the things we try to provide, two meals for them, breakfast and lunch of which we know that the R100.00 which they pay is very little." Providing children two meals a day over and above the other benefits that they were receiving, while charging them R100.00 per month went a long way concerning poverty alleviation because the children only needed to eat one meal per day instead of three at home during the days that they attended the ECD. In areas where they live, not many families can provide their children with three meals a day.

The teacher who works at the ECD is said to be a volunteer; however, according to the pastor, the ECD undertook to train and pay her a stipend. The ECD did this, even though they were not making a profit from the fees that they were charging. Through these gestures, the ECD contributed to community development. Paying the teacher a stipend and training her has a multiplier effect in the sense that the teacher would become motivated to perform her job, and with the training she would have acquired it would enable her to provide quality education to the children and even make her employable.

Another unique contribution that the ECD was making related to teaching the children Christian values. Unlike other ECDs not aligned with congregations, the pastor claimed that they made sure that their ECD incorporated Christian values in their curriculum. The pastor said that the other part of the job of the teacher was to advance the kingdom of God. Regarding building relationships with parents, the teacher was required to identify one or two children whom the pastor would visit at their homes. When the pastor arrived at their home, he would ask their parents what difference they might have noticed in terms of the behaviour or conduct of their children since they started attending the ECD. The pastor said that most parents would say, "The child has learned to pray, learned to bother them (us) that before we eat or sleep we are supposed to pray even when we wake up we are supposed to pray." In a nutshell, the congregation used the ECD to reach out to the community with the gospel.

Pastor 2 claimed that their congregation's ECD was making a unique contribution in three areas; namely, charging lower fees, hiring people even from other congregations and teaching children morality through which they believed that they were contributing towards community development in reducing crime in the community.

Concerning charging lower fees the pastor indicated that in comparison to other ECDs in their area, they were charging lower fees. He attributed this to the fact that they were not servicing any mortgage on their buildings. They had therefore decided to pass on the advantage to the community through charging lower fees. When it came to employing teachers, they employed any qualified person irrespective of their denominational affiliation. Through this act, they were putting into practice the commandment of loving a neighbour as oneself. Concerning teaching children morality the pastor in his own words said, "This part of teaching morals we think we are sort of participating immensely to the community development by teaching morality." He further said, "If we fail to teach a person when he/she is at an early stage (of his/her life) it would be difficult for us to contribute to control crime around our area and in the world at large." The pastor believed that this was critically important as it helped to shape children's character and mould them into responsible community members.

The third congregation, through its pastor, claimed to be making a unique contribution in three ways. First, they accepted all children from the community irrespective of their religious affiliation; second, by developing the community through educating its children; and third, by teaching children morality.

Pastor 3 said that they intended to develop children's faith from an early age regardless of their religious background, as this contributes to community development. He further said that they believed that when they invested in education the community would have a better generation in the future. On the contrary, if children were neglected, this would contribute to problems such as high unemployment rate, poverty, drug and/or alcohol abuse, diseases and crime, amongst others, in the future. In his own words, he said, "If the children are not built from an early stage with their faith and so on, it tends to temper with their morals as they grow up." The congregation

took it upon themselves to be proactive by assisting in moulding the future generations by teaching them what is right and wrong now rather than waiting until the children are involved in criminal conduct only to come then and try to rehabilitate them.

Figure 3 depicts the contribution made by the congregations through their ECDs.

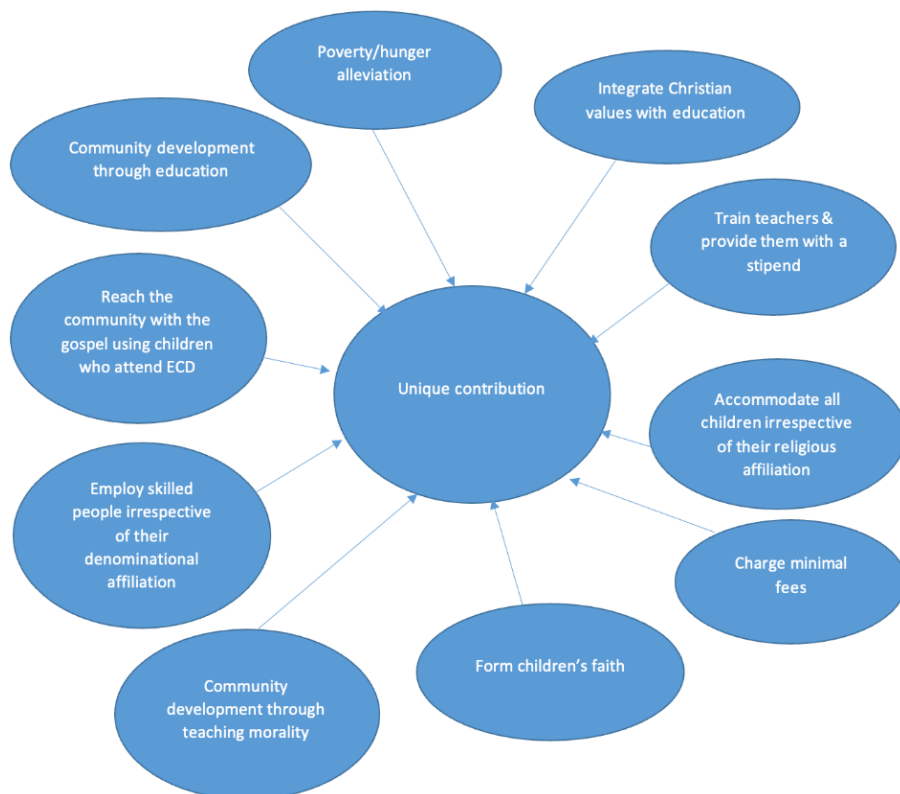


Figure 3: Unique contribution made by congregations through ECDs

In conclusion, the ECDs of the three congregations were making unique contributions in their communities, albeit in their own but complementary ways. Congregation 1 charged the children R100.00 per month, while the congregation subsidised other expenses such as paying the teacher a stipend and training her, and it also provided children with two meals per day. The

pastor further indicated that they evangelised the community using the children who attended their ECD centre. Congregation 2, on the other hand, charged lower fees, hired people even from other congregations and taught children morality through which they believed that they contributed to crime reduction in the community. Lastly, congregation 3 contributed uniquely by accepting all children from the community irrespective of their religious affiliation, developing the community through educating its children, and teaching children morality.

In a nutshell, the congregations made a unique contribution to the communities through their ECDs through poverty alleviation; that is, providing children with meals and charging lower fees compared to their counterparts, and contributing to community development through job creation, educating children and teaching them morality, thereby investing towards better future generations. Furthermore, they engaged with the community through the gospel using children to reach their parents.

4. Recommendations

Notwithstanding the contribution that congregations are making, it should be noted that according to Anderson et al. (2003:32), the purpose of ECD is to “seek to prevent or minimize the physical, cognitive, and emotional limitations of children disadvantaged by

poverty.” And that ECD programmes should be comprehensively designed so that they improve the cognitive and social-emotional functioning of pre-school children. This would in turn influence the children’s readiness to learn in the school environment. It is in light of these that the recommendations would be made.

While congregations are performing a good job in terms of helping the children from poor households in terms of poverty alleviation, they however need to have a way of ensuring that the poorest of the poor benefit, since there are different levels of poverty in the communities. They could achieve this by obtaining a list of indigent families in their localities and also by profiling their members to determine the neediest amongst them so that they prioritise them for their services. Congregations should consider collaborating with other like-minded organisations in tackling the issue of

poverty while still maintaining their uniqueness. In this regard, Thesnaar (2014:5) advises the church to engage other stakeholders such as social, political and economic stakeholders with the clear purpose of addressing the plight of the poor.

In the case where congregations employ members of the community in their ECDs who are not members of their congregations, they should orientate them in terms of the culture and ethos of their organisations. Congregations should also have a mission and vision for their ECDs. These should be made known and adhered to by all their employees. Furthermore, they should have an assimilation programme for the new employees so that these employees could in turn be able to pass on the organisation's culture and values to the new employees as well.

Regarding the faith formation of the children and teaching them morality, it is recommended that the congregations should primarily focus on making disciples as their goal and as secondary goal teaching them morality. Roberto (2005:11) advises congregations to be guided by this goal in pursuing faith formation that "seeks to inform, form, transform, and transform individuals, families, and the entire community." Congregations should keep focusing on their mission.

5. Lessons learnt in conducting empirical research in the township

In conducting empirical research in an African context in Mangaung Township congregations, there were several lessons learnt. These included amongst others, the formal ECD framework as described by the Department of Education vis-à-vis how the congregations either understood or implemented ECD; the different types of ECDs and their programmes or lack thereof; the infrastructural and human capital challenges experienced by the ECDs and how these have a bearing on the functioning of ECDs; lastly, how the congregations understood and interpreted their mandate in the community or the world through ECD.

The formal ECD framework does not apply to all ECDs. The Department of Social Development only registers and has proper facilities which are run by qualified personnel in formal recognised centres. The challenge in a

township context is which ECDs may be regarded as the formal ones and which ones are not? Because of a host of challenges, ECD centres to a large extent do not seem to be capable of assisting children to grow and thrive as they should according to the formal ECD framework. Guidance should be given to all ECDs and the research highlighted this need for a broader framework of understanding, than the formal official definitions.

In the township, there are different types of ECDs called by different names. For example, crèche or day-care centres. The question is what distinguishes one from the other? These different types of ECDs are owned by different people or entities who subscribe to different schools of thought. For example, psychosocial theory or faith formation theory. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but the challenge is how to strike a balance between the two or more different perspectives. Moreover, as mentioned before, these ECD centres are given different names such as crèche, Grade-R schooling, and/or day-care centre. Some of these ECDs have programmes that they use to teach children while others do not have them. Even some of those that have them are outdated. Congregations may provide an efficient entry point of influence to the different ECDs.

Infrastructure and personnel are the two main challenges in many ECD centres; hence, some of ECD centres were not registered with the Department of Social Development. Some of the ECDs in the township have an acute shortage of infrastructure such as proper and adequate classrooms and play toys and facilities. They also lacked books. Coupled with that was a lack of suitably qualified personnel. The research highlighted the needs of ECDs in a township context.

The above-mentioned challenges, to a large extent, could have an impact on the methodologies that may be used in performing empirical work in the township. Some methodologies are more suited or appropriate to certain settings than others and infrastructure becomes a critical factor in that regard. For example, the use of participatory action research or ethnography vis-à-vis interviews. The factors to consider, amongst others, in determining the appropriate methods and tools would be the availability of infrastructure and other resources. The researcher therefore ought to know the study area and select appropriate methods and tools to use.

The church should be clear about its mission in the communities it is based in and in the world. The church does not have a mission of its own. However, it is called to participate in the mission of God. This will make it play a more meaningful role in the community, which is not played by any other entity, even if they are offering similar services. The three pastors, through their congregations' ECDs claimed to be contributing to community development, poverty alleviation, and morality, amongst others, albeit one who indicated that they were also engaging with the community through the gospel and have a strategy of achieving that.

The church must be intentional in engaging with the communities with the gospel. It is its primary mandate and this should not happen by chance. In performing the empirical work in the township it would appear that some of the congregations' ECDs were not clear enough regarding how they were undertaking the church's mission. More emphasis was on morality and other issues. While these were good things to do, however, they are part of the mission and therefore could also be performed by other organisations, not the church.

6. Conclusion

The study set out to determine the contribution that the congregations in the township can make through early childhood development centres. The objectives of the study were: to determine the types of ECD centres and programmes that congregations had, to determine the mission of the congregations in the community regarding ECD programmes, and to determine the unique contribution that congregations can make in the community through early childhood development. The study found that in the main, the congregations had crèches as their ECD centres. Their mission varies from offering education that encourages better social and spiritual development, and inculcating Christian values, and contributing to poverty alleviation and helping children to experience better (quality) growth and form their faith. And lastly, to build children holistically (morally, spiritually and otherwise).

Congregations were also found to be making an important unique contribution in the following areas: poverty alleviation, integrating Christian values with education, training teachers and providing them

with a stipend, accommodating all children in their centres irrespective of their religious affiliation, employing skilled teachers irrespective of their denominational affiliation, charging minimal fees, forming children's faith, contributing to community development through teaching children education and morality, and reaching the community with the gospel using children who attend their ECD centres.

Lastly, there are important lessons to be learnt when performing empirical work in the township. These relate to the implication of the definition and framework of early childhood development, types of ECDs and programmes, infrastructure and personnel challenges and the mission of the church in the community and the world. All these have a bearing on the methodologies used when performing empirical research in the township.

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