



## Reflective accounts

# My first two hours with ecl

Ester Kaino Nakale, **ecl**Researcher, Windhoek, Namibia  
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## My first two hours with ecl

I am Ester Kaino Nakale and I have recently started to work with Rowena Mould, an **ecl**Catalyst working in Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia. These notes are a few initial reflections on one of my first introductions to **ecl** work in general, and more specifically a new approach to nurturing that develops the emotional wellbeing of a group of 7 to 13 year olds. What I found was quite surprising, challenging the more traditional methods often employed in our educational settings – and, I realised, had been fully internalised by me as a parent over the years.

### **The situation**

One Tuesday afternoon, I went to The Berhhard Nordkamp Centre (BNC). It runs educational, after school programmes, which takes school children from grades 1 to 12 from the local public schools who want to come for after school classes, sporting and cultural activities. The Centre is situated in Katutura, a township in Windhoek where most low income residents live. The children are taught by local Namibian teachers as well as international volunteers.

### **What needs were we addressing?**

I understood that a large number of the children that come to these sessions are not emotionally or intellectually supported at home, and often come from homes with internal problems.

### **What did we do?**

I have to admit that the first thing that came to my mind when I thought of handling a group of 20 or so children between the ages of 11 and 12, was to keep them quiet and focused by means of sanctions or even threatening them with punishment. That is how it was done where I grew up 30 years ago; that is what I know. I was positively surprised to experience an alternative that is much calmer and does not involve punitive means to keep the group focused on the task at hand.



I sat in on a 2 hour session with a small group comprised of 10 children, ranging in age from 7 to 13, where they come together to look to find ways they can be of support to each other, and are given a chance to express their emotions, largely by talking about them. At this point, I did not grasp what exactly went on in the sessions and what they were meant to achieve. It was my first time at the Centre, and I had expected a typical classroom setting with a desk and a chair for each child. To my surprise, the room had a "hang out" atmosphere, with cushions to sit on and blankets to keep warm. I also expected the challenge of maintaining order, as I did not see any signs of physical activities that would keep the children "occupied".



The session started with a "stilling", where calming music was played as children lay down on their backs, with the right hand resting on their heart, while the left hand resting on their tummy. A mood meter [feelings thermometer] was also used to check in on how each child felt emotionally. It had been made by the children and basically consisted of a painting of sunshine, clouds, rain and lightening, and hung in the room to represent the various emotions that children might be feeling. 'Positive' emotions were represented by sunshine and blue sky whilst more 'negative' emotions were represented by clouds, rain and lightning, depending on the severity of the emotion.

As the session went on, I realised that it required the rest of the group to be still and listen when focus is being given to one of the children. So I thought chaos will surely happen at some point. 20 minutes later... no chaos. One hour... still no chaos and by this time, I was so amazed by what was happening that I forgot about my preconceived idea of a "guaranteed" commotion of some sort.



The children were so articulate about what they were feeling as they shared stories of their home situations. A tool called "Systemic Pizza" was used where children place differently coloured stickers on a circular board, to represent themselves and significant people in their lives, usually a mother and a father. The "Pizza" is a tool used in ecl, that gives a starting point for the child to talk about what is happening at home, and how it affects him or her. I was amazed by how calm and present the children were when either one of them was sharing with the rest of the group, and at how the facilitator was able to prioritise which child to listen to at a time, without making the rest of the group feel left out. For instance, one child was sharing his "Pizza" with the group when another child grew impatient and kept raising her hand to get the attention from the facilitator. The facilitator checked in with the impatient girl by kindly asking her, "Is it something urgent or can it wait until he is done sharing his story?" The girl then paused for a short while and said, "It can wait". This seemed to be the way of doing things. The facilitator checks in with the group to "agree" how to proceed with the session such as asking if the group is willing to listen to one more child's Pizza before going for a break. One would think, 'they are children, you just tell them what to do and they obey'. I left thinking otherwise.

### **Initial reflections**

The two hours left me asking myself, why is talking about emotions not encouraged in children more in school and at home? Would it be perceived as a child "talking back" to the parents and teachers, and being disrespectful? As a parent, would I lose my "authority" by establishing mutual respect with my child? One thing I became more aware of after the two hours is that children are thoughtful, articulate and sensitive beings who are very aware of what is happening around them. Given a chance and a safe environment, and someone to listen to them, they are able to respectfully say what they are feeling, behave appropriately and not resort to violence or a throw tantrum – and of course be in a much, much better place for learning.

To learn more about ecl, email us at  
mia.perry@**ecl**foundation.org

Or visit [www.eclfoundation.org](http://www.eclfoundation.org)

