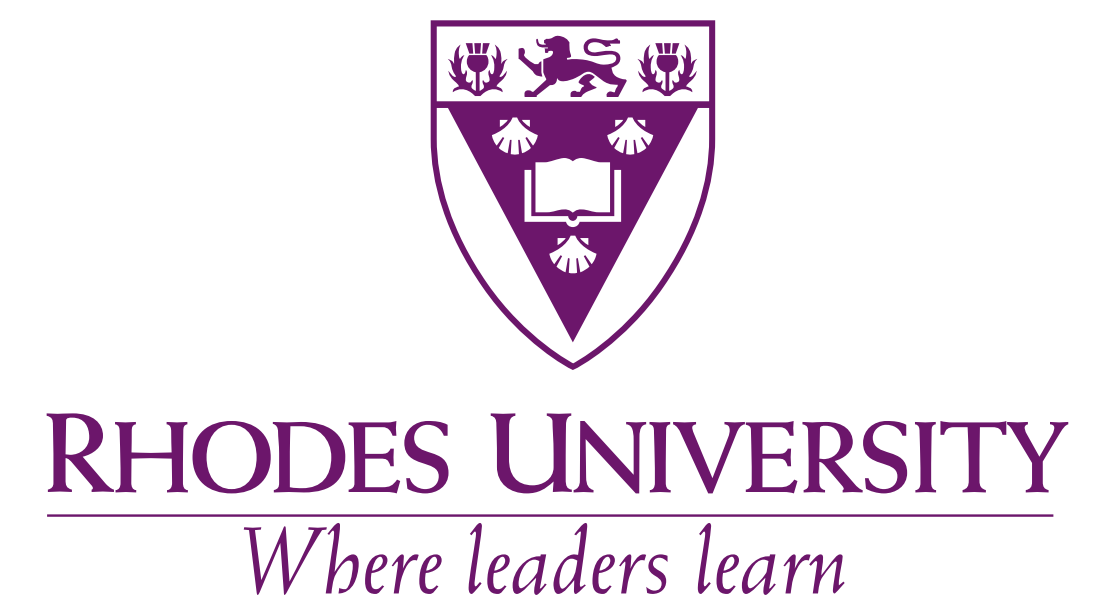


## *1stWeEat!* Strengthening Local Food Security Through ECD Centres



### Lausanne Olvitt

Environmental Learning Research Centre (ELRC)  
Department of Secondary & Post-school Education  
Faculty of Education, Rhodes University  
[l.olvitt@ru.ac.za](mailto:l.olvitt@ru.ac.za)



### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Food insecurity is a matter of 'social-economic-ecological injustice' that is of great relevance to the education sector. The South African Demographic and Health Survey reports that one in four children under age 5 is stunted (short for their age). This devastating statistic carries severe long-term consequences for individual children and for the country because stunting can negatively affect brain function, organ development and the immune system. Besides poor achievement at school, stunting can result in decreased

productivity and higher risk of obesity and diabetes in adulthood. In the small city of Makhanda in the Eastern Cape province, the food and malnutrition crisis mirrors the national profile and was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many small children in Makhanda's Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres face hunger daily. Parents are not always able to provide them with food which places pressure on the ECD Centres to provide what is sometimes a child's only meal for the day.

### RESEARCH PROJECT

In 2022, Lausanne Olvitt, Nikki Green and Sakhe Ntlabezo collaborated with the Umthathi Training Project to establish small food gardens in 13 ECD centres in Makhanda. Through professional development workshops, planting demonstrations,

site visits, interviews and focus group discussions, they investigated the experiences and priorities of the ECD practitioners and community volunteers as they learned about sustainable food gardening.

### WHAT DID THIS PROJECT ACHIEVE?

The *1stWeEat!* project brought ECD practitioners together in ways that they seldom encounter. This appears to have been valuable for their professional networking and for developing a shared understanding and sense of solidarity. The project provided a platform for 'therapeutic factors' associated with working in groups around a common concern (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005\*). Some of the 'therapeutic factors' that the research team identified (based on observations and interviews with the ECD practitioners) include:

- information sharing (practitioners talked about the challenges and responses to gardening and other topics, often casually giving advice or sharing tips with each other)
- universality (where practitioners realised 'we are not alone in this')
- altruism (opportunities to offer insights and advice towards the greater good)
- developing self-worth (practitioners realising that their contributions and experiences have value; they have something to contribute)
- instillation of hope (recognising that change is possible and something can be done).

Although the actual food gardens were slow to start and face many sustainability challenges in terms of maintenance and damage by livestock, vandalism and theft, the partnerships formed through the *1stWeEat!* project laid an important foundation for future collaborations in the local ECD sector. The *1stWeEat!* project was the space within which diverse partners with overlapping mandates could have thoughtful and strategic discussions about Makhanda, food security, the ECD sector and quality education. Despite their geographic proximity, such conversations were seldom had before this project.

\* Yalom, I.D. & Leszcz, M. (2005). The theory and practice of group psychotherapy. New York: Basic Books.



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