



TITLE: A Path Unexpected. A memoir

AUTHOR: Jane Evans

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REVIEWER: Astrid Hansen

<https://>

orcid.org/000-0001-9542-4321

AFFILIATION: Private Practitioner

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A Path Unexpected. A Memoir by Jane Evans

Information on the author

In 1976 Jane Evans married a farmer and moved from Johannesburg to a farm near Viljoenskroon, leaving her profession as the women's page editor of the Rand Daily Mail behind. She started her first nursery school on a farm in the area and subsequently became the founder of the Ntataise training programme for nursery school teachers in rural areas. Through this project, nursery schools were created on nearby farms and later in rural areas throughout South Africa. Evans won the Star's Woman of the Year award in 1988. This brought Ntataise and the importance of early learning to the media. Ntataise also won the award for Exceptional Contribution to Education in South Africa in the field of Early Childhood Development.

The Review

A Path Unexpected, a Memoir, follows the life of Jane Evans and her founding of the Ntataise training programme for early childhood teachers in the rural areas of South Africa. The memoir, which also serves as an account of early childhood development in South Africa, follows Evans's life and activism during Apartheid and beyond.

After following her husband to a farm in the Free State, Evans saw how the inequalities of Apartheid affected farm workers and their children. Keeping the story within its context she poignantly describes their reactions to the Soweto Student Protests and the violent retaliation of the police on 16 June 1976. Evans realised that the inequalities of the education system extended into the realm of Early Childhood development: there were no nursery schools for the children in rural areas. Creating the first farm-based nursery schools in South Africa, Evans, with the ongoing support of her husband, began to share information on early learning with the women working on the farm.

She emphasised the importance on mother-tongue speaking teachers, and of parental understanding of early learning. With her vision of making education available to all South Africans she reached out to the most remote rural areas with the goal of training the women to be nursery school teachers and equipping them with the skills for early childhood education. Through her efforts of contacting early childhood development organisations and raising funds for training she created the Ntataise organisation. Her organisation aimed to reach more people and to implement their learning programmes throughout South Africa. Attempting to make teacher training easier and to provide these teachers with support they developed teacher aids, such as the "*Learning through play*" training book. The Nelson Mandela Children's fund financed the "*toy trolley project*" where colourful shop-trolleys were packed with the toys needed for teachers trained by Ntataise. Through this project they managed to apply the principles of early childhood education even in the most remotely situated rural areas. Due to the immense reach of the organisation, it took many years for the teachers that were trained by Ntataise to receive certificates for their training.

Jane Evans's book is relevant to occupational therapists in South Africa as many of the principles focused on within the practice are reflected in the recounting of her life and work. One such principle is Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In the book Evans illustrates that education and childhood development could not be addressed adequately if the basic needs of food, housing, health, and safety were not attended to first. She highlights the importance of community service, exemplifying through her experience that involving the community in a project and empowering them to eventually continue with it independently is paramount.

She herself always worked as part of a team, always keeping the visions of her colleagues in mind.

The idea of learning through play, which is a focus of the book, is the base of all early childhood intervention. It is reflected in the toys, the songs, the stories as well as the gross and fine motor movement introduced to children from an early age. The importance of this for nursery school aged children is shown throughout the book. A research team of the University of the Free-State under Dr Ingrid Herbst, an occupational therapist, concluded that the Ntataise early intervention programme *“has been scientifically proven to be extremely effective and valuable”*^{1:230}.

The personal nature of the book, and its similarities to my own experiences with early childhood intervention, make it a very relatable read. The name of the organisation Ntataise, and its meaning of leading a young child by the hand, describes the purpose of early childhood intervention perfectly and encapsulates my experiences within it. I especially cherished the following words of Nelson Mandela that were included in the book: *“My dear young people: I see the light in your eyes, the energy of your bodies and the hope that is in your spirit. I know that it is you, not I, who will make the future. It is you not I, who will fix our wrongs and carry forward all that is right with the world.”*^{1:261} This memoir by Jane Evans exemplifies the positive effects that one woman’s vision can have on the lives of a community. Her vision has helped many children grow and learn in their communities, where it may not have been possible before.