

Summary Report of the Teleconference on Meaningful Child and Parent Participation in Early Childhood Development Held April 28, 2011

Background

The Caribbean Child Development Centre (CCDC), of the University of the West Indies (UWI), Open Campus, with support from UNESCO, has undertaken networking activities aimed at strengthening early childhood development (ECD) in the Caribbean. This project includes:

- A series of four regional teleconferences, provided via the UWI Open Campus Country Sites;
- An electronic forum (e-forum) that serves as an 'open meeting place' for ECD stakeholders on the CaribECD website; and,
- Renovation and re-launch of the CaribECD website.

The first teleconference was held on Thursday April 28, from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. (EST), and facilitated by the project coordinator, Heather Gallimore, from the Open Learning Centre, Open Campus at Mona, in Kingston, Jamaica. Invitees included ECD colleagues in the 17 UWI Open Campus Countries who kindly extended the teleconference invitation to other interested stakeholders. A special call was made for male participants and invitees were asked to invite male colleagues and fathers.

Participants

The three guest presenters were:

1. Janet Brown, Researcher and International Consultant, currently working with Parenting Partners Caribbean;
2. Susan Parke, Education Officer, Ministry of Education, currently implementing the High Scope Curriculum, in Grenada.
3. Richard Troupe, Parenting & Community Development Consultant, Jamaica, currently leading interventions with/for children and parents.

Participating were 104 colleagues (12 males), in 12 countries, including: Antigua & Barbuda (5), Bahamas (9), Belize (22), Bermuda (3), Cayman Islands (4), Grenada (6), Jamaica (8), Montserrat (1), St. Kitts & Nevis (37), St. Lucia (3), St. Vincent & the Grenadines (4), and Trinidad & Tobago (1).

Participants included ECD practitioners, administrators, educators, education officers, consultants, parents, grandparents, students and others. The list of participants is attached, as Appendix A.

Preface

The e-forum <http://www.uwi.edu/caribecd/forum/default.aspx> opened two weeks prior to the first teleconference, to provide a space for colleagues to discuss the pending teleconference topic, and during that time, they were repeatedly encouraged to post comments.

The following excerpt, from the e-forum preamble, was intended to frame on-line discussion leading up to the teleconference:

Many of us continue to under-estimate young children's potential for participation in daily activities as competent, rational decision-makers. We often disregard their views, whether consciously or unconsciously, and we tend to give them instructions, limited choices and boundaries instead of engaging them in dialogue, allowing them to propose and lead a discussion, particularly discussions involving decisions.

We are challenged to recognize young children as subjects of rights, not merely as submissive, reactive beneficiaries of adult care and protection because we are obliged (under the Convention on the Rights of the Child) to give serious consideration to the views of all children, regardless of age. The right to participate extends to all children capable of expressing a view and allows children to proactively realize other rights; it helps the child's personal development. Often misunderstood, this right does not entitle children to undue freedom without corresponding responsibilities or to disrespect others; it is not a license for children to have free reign. Participation, in this context, is about encouraging children to voluntarily express their opinions and to actively engage in decision making at different levels in matters that concern them, individually and collectively. A young child's views should not automatically be given less weight.

Since parents are the first and primary source of support for young children, their involvement in the facilitation of children's participation is critical and should be an integral part of efforts to foster and enhance learning. Evidence suggests family involvement promotes success for children. How can we assist parents to facilitate meaningful child participation at home and in community life?

Children have the right participate in the process of defining their needs, treatment and destiny. Children's participation in society supports a sense of belonging and inclusion, and teaches children how they can bring about change. We should view them as experts in their experience and permit them to have a transformative effect on society. How can we best facilitate this?

Given the prevailing attitudes, practices and culture in Caribbean environments where young children spend most of their time (home and ECD services), how we can better create opportunities for young children's meaningful participation in decisions that affect them, particularly in the home and in early childhood programmes?

Guiding questions were posed as 'food for thought', however only three persons (presenters) posted comments; none pertained to the topic. Alternative strategies will have to be explored to engage colleagues in group dialogue using available technology.

Presentations

The three presentations focused on the various considerations that give meaning to and impact child and parent participation in ECD.

- a) Janet Brown spoke on three related areas (child participation, parent participation, and meaningful participation), provided varying interpretations of each, and research findings that validate child and parent participation as critical components (inputs and outputs) of ECD.

Child participation may be defined as: ensuring all children are included and treated with equity. Programmes often overlook particularly vulnerable groups such as disabled children or indigenous minorities. Research highlights that the particular risks to young children are from malnutrition, disease, poverty, neglect, social exclusion and a range of other adversities. Proper prevention and intervention strategies during early childhood have the potential to impact positively on young children's current wellbeing and future development. Research also indicates that children at-risk will show more

gains/benefits than others less-disadvantaged from their participation in good quality preschool settings. Inclusiveness means reaching out to the most marginalized child. *How do we work to ensure that the most vulnerable children are reached”?*

An alternative definition of child participation is: children’s views are sought and taken into consideration in programmes and policies of ECD. Lillian Katz’s insights on the Italian Reggio Emilia preschool approach were shared and participants were encouraged to identify ways in which we assist “inborn dispositions to flourish” and the conditions we can create to make this happen.

The definition of child participation that challenges many of us conceptually is: all people, however young, are entitled to have their views respected and valued. Janet Brown’s article on Parental Resistance to Child Rights was referenced. Also cited were Shanti George’s work on realizing respect for young children in their everyday environments and Geri Lansdown’s research on parent-child relationships. Both found when children’s own rights are respected, they learn to respect the rights of others; reciprocity is the foundation of mutual respect.

UNICEF, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and UN General Comment 7 advocate for the nurturance, care, guidance and protection of young children, in ways that are respectful of their individuality and growing capacities; acknowledging that respect for young children’s evolving capacities (processes of maturation and learning whereby children progressively acquire knowledge, competencies and understanding) is crucial for realisation of their rights.

Why is the concept of mutual respect so difficult for some of us to embrace? Cases of disrespect, the power-play between adults and children, and exclusion of young children’s opinions were discussed. The noted successful outcomes of participatory approaches demonstrated how respect translates into shared behavioural codes that become routine in daily life.

Definitions of parent participation included distinctions between levels of parental involvement and personal investment; from including all parents in consultations, tasks, etc. regardless of their background, in a climate of mutual respect (reaching out to those harder to reach, families at-risk, more vulnerable, and/or less willing to participate, particularly fathers), to caring about the views and ideas of parents about their children, the preschool setting, and helping parents to see the consequence of alternative behaviours, then trusting them to choose in the interests of themselves and/or their children. Mutual respect is the key.

‘Meaningful participation’ implies involvement and influence and conveys that child and adult both take meaning from the situation; new understanding, new skill, sense of value in participation, of having their ideas, feelings valued.

Practical applications of concepts for engaging children in day care and preschool settings were shared, such as modeling respectful behaviours with others, de-gendering activities and toys, choosing activities, and expressing feelings and ideas. Parents should be encouraged to provide feedback on the programme and staff performance towards making improvements.

b) Susan Parke spoke on facilitating child participation in ECD programs using the HighScope Curriculum.

In Grenada, and elsewhere, teachers tend to direct and control basically all that happens in the classroom, which can lead to retardation of creative thinking, learned helplessness, enabled ignorance, lack of problem solving skills, and poor esteem. In an effort to change and facilitate greater child participation,

the Early Childhood Unit, with UNICEF's assistance, is implementing the HighScope Curriculum. It is also being used in Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, and St Kitts and Nevis. A cadre of trained trainers are expected to serve as the change agents, providing instruction and support for use of HighScope's Active Participatory Learning approach.

Active Participatory Learning is at the core of the HighScope Curriculum which advocates learning best occurs when five key ingredients are present, and these key ingredients were outlined in detail:

- Materials
- Manipulation
- Choice
- Language/ thought
- Support from adults

Assessment of the HighScope approach in Grenadian ECD services thus far has shown it to be quite effective and its strategies are expected to help to improve ECD practices and foster greater support children's meaningful participation in ECD across the Eastern Caribbean.

c) Richard Troupe focused on the facilitation of meaningful parent participation using multiple strategies.

Noteworthy international, regional and national developments that have created the enabling environment for meaningful child and parent participation in ECD were acknowledged, including:

- Ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- Regional cooperation in training, research, and curriculum and material development (as strongly supported by international development partners).
- Legislation, policy, standards and regulations

Participants were encouraged to identify the developments that are creating an enabling environment for meaningful child and parent participation in their countries and to build on the existing strengths of the sector, including:

- The passion of practitioners;
- The energy, creativity and resilience of the sector despite the challenges in the global and national economies and of those within the communities and families;
- The role and contribution of the church and private sector in early childhood.

Some typical challenges were outlined, such as:

- The need to reposition Parent Teachers Association (PTA) as a platform to compliment, support and reinforce positive early childhood experiences.
- Helping parents to deal with the baggage of their own childhood; many of whom were victims of violence, hopelessness and powerlessness.
- Harnessing the skills and best practices to parenting that parents have to offer.

PTA meetings provide a space to identify, share and celebrate best practices and coping skills; to strengthen parents. Effective interventions include investing in a series parenting training workshops and establishing a Parenting Corner. Strategies that could be replicated were shared, such as a sports rally which involves fathers.

In Jamaica, meaningful child and parent participation in ECD has been impacted by:

- Improved standards in the delivery of early childhood education;
- Significant investment in the training and certification of practitioners;
- Improvement in the physical plants;
- Improved curriculum

Important considerations for enhancing child and parent participation are:

- The capacity of practitioners to model respect, regard, and inclusion of children;
- Cultural concepts of child participation within the home;
- Use of PTAs as vehicles for promoting participation.
- Use of creative, alternative techniques for reaching hard-to-reach parents, such as home visits.

Discussion

Participants spoke of the related challenges they face, such as reaching vulnerable children and getting fathers involved. Advice was forthcoming and strategies for overcoming challenges were shared. A few colleagues gave updates on what is happening in the sector in their respective countries, such as Belize's gap analysis of ECD curricula and the Roving Caregivers Programme in the Eastern Caribbean, and areas in need of strengthening, such as the registration process of EC institutions in Jamaica. A copy of Trinidad & Tobago's National Curriculum for ECCE may be accessed at www.moe.gov.tt

The renovation of the CaribECD site was noted and colleagues were urged to review it and suggest how make it more informative and responsive to the Caribbean ECD sector's needs, as well as to provide updated information and resource links.

Submitted by Heather Gallimore
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