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NOTES FROM OVERSEAS:

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE CARIBBEAN*

Many Processes: One Purpose, One Product

The twelve years from 1966 to 1978 were very exciting ones for early childhood education in the Caribbean. During this period early childhood education was acknowledged as the foundation upon which to build the fundamental principle of "equality of quality educational opportunities for all" - a principle which each island government supports and is prepared to accept as an obligation and make real for its children - rich and poor.

Efforts to meet the special needs of disadvantaged children in the age range 3 - 6 years in the Caribbean were in the main influenced by two projects under the aegis of the School of Education, University of the West Indies, and funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The first was the Project for Early Childhood Education (PECE), 1966-72, which aimed, *inter alia*, at developing teacher training strategies for preparing para-professionals to teach 3 - 6 year olds; experimenting with and developing a curriculum for these children; sensitising the public to the needs of these children, their schools and teachers, as well as developing functional activity between school and community. The Centre for Early Childhood Education (CECE), 1972-1978, as the successor to PECE was a major contributory factor to the heightening of regional interest in and concern for the underprivileged 3 - 6 year olds. The flexible terms and nature of its funding permitted the Centre to make its resources in such areas as programme and curriculum development, and the training of teachers and instructional supervisors available to Ministries of Education and teacher education institutions locally, regionally and internationally. This renaissance in early childhood education was also enhanced by the Barbados 1967 Conference¹ on "The Needs of the Young Child", and by the Bernard van Leer Foundation seminars in Jamaica² and Curacao³ which, respectively, examined "the present and future dimensions of early childhood education in the region" and "the content of early childhood education as it might operate in the region with possible variations in approach".

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A DIVERSITY OF APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

An examination of the operations of and partnerships in early childhood education in the islands reveals that although differences exist in the way early childhood has been developed, there seems to be a singleness of purpose and a regional determination "to get each disadvantaged child out of his isolated class and into the one humanity." ⁴

There is a great variety of organisational, administrative and managerial patterns in early childhood education programmes in the Caribbean. There is too a wide diversity in the names by which the institutions in the different islands are known: from nursery, kindergarten and infant school to prep school, private school and basic school. From the available evidence 77 per cent of the islands have a sequential two or three-year early childhood education programme. Although some islands do not have adequate statistics from which to obtain accurate data on the number of children in the age group 3 to 6 years, there is evidence to make it reasonably safe to say that in six of the islands 248,000 of these children are enrolled in early childhood education institutions and over 100,000 are not registered in any school.

DIVERSITY OF SPONSORSHIP OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

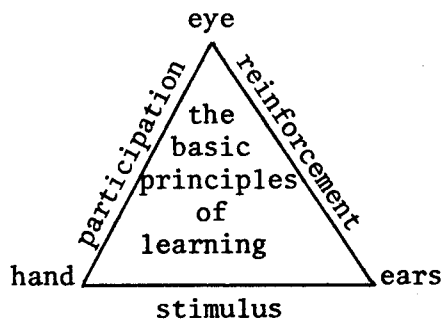
The diversity of sponsorship of early childhood education and of organisations represented in its control has resulted in extreme ranges of financing and financial costs. In 65 per cent of the islands a combination of budgetary limitations, overcrowding and lack of facilities and equipment account for the large numbers of children in this age range not enrolled in any institution.

Although most of the schools now established receive income from gifts, fees and grants, it would seem that this is too spasmodic to stimulate growth and development. Acceptance by governments of their responsibility for providing direct, long-term financial support will not only do this but will also ensure educational experiences of quality for these children.

BASIC PRACTICES

During the last five years a set of generalisations based on the needs of the children in the region has been developed. Included among the basic practices emerging from the various early childhood education programmes are those which emphasise the place given to the curiosity and the sense of wonder inherent in all children, as well as those practices and resources which highlight

the importance of *people, places and things in the community* for generating motivation for learning. It is conceded that for these young children there should be reasonably long unhampered periods for interweaving their experiences, for developing manipulative skill using material in the environment for experimenting with bodily movement, for finding a constructive place in group activities with peers and adults, and integrating these experiences with thinking and creativity. In addition to concerning children with people working in the locality and so enriching their experiences of the environment, "found materials" in and near the schools are being utilised for making teaching-learning and reinforcement aids. The emphasis of their approaches to learning may be set out thus:



In doing this, a wealth of sensory experiences and opportunities for interesting and creative activities are obtained through *local materials*. These help children to develop a basic concept of matter and acquaint them with units of measurement. They offer experiences of sound, liquids and weather, and develop awareness and experience of local flora and fauna. They also help children to understand and appreciate the interdependence of members of a family, of man and his environment and the interrelationships of man and the objects around him.

This approach is considered critical to purposeful learning; for otherwise "children (from low-income homes) will tend to approach new situations with inhibiting rather than exploring behaviour, and where their behaviour is not withdrawing it is apt to be explosive rather than expressive - they slap objects rather than manipulate them purposively." ⁵

HOME, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

One of the most important influences of PECE and CECE on early childhood education programmes in the region has been to establish the practice of education as a joint enterprise of home,

school and community. It is now firmly realised that parents are not only the first but the most important and influential teachers available to their children, therefore they are entitled to be partners in promoting the development of their own and other children. Furthermore, because the child is the product of the home, school and community, the three must get together if consistency is to be given to the young child's world. An important corollary of this intimate relation of home and school is the urgent necessity of creating an active programme of parent and parenthood education as an integral part of early childhood education.

Experience has shown that each community must be educated in its role as co-worker with the school. Although all communities do not start at the same stage, this educative process may take them through three levels of experience. The first is that of *co-operation*. This is the lowest level and one at which the community is only expected to lend support to specific school functions. The second is *participation*. At this level the community takes part in organising the function and in contributing to its general administration. Sometimes a member of the community is on the governing body of the school. The third level is *involvement*. In most cases the governing body of the school consists of members elected by the parents of children attending the school and in this way the community is able to make a direct impact on the school and on its educational process, purpose and product.

ESTABLISHING EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES

The objectives of early childhood education are usually determined by the needs of the children, the needs and quality of the teachers, the aspirations of the parents, the concerns of the community and the philosophic system adopted by the organisers of the programme.

In 1970 fifty percent of the islands' teachers conceived "preparation for primary school" as the first goal of an early childhood education programme, 16 percent placed this goal seventh and one island placed it twelfth (last). "Social development" was rated first by 25 percent and second and fourth by 40 percent. The goal "growth in language" was rated from second (two islands) to tenth (one island). One island rated "growth in self esteem and self image" as the first goal of its schools, another reported "safe place for children while mothers are at work" as its schools' first goal. "Awareness of personal needs and strengths", "emotional development", "correct attitude toward people", and "growth in independence" were each rated first once, and "physical development" twice.

By the mid 1970s early childhood education became less orientated to the acquisition of information per se, and more to the "adaptive attitudes, critical reactions and disciplines which teach how to learn"⁶ Consequently, the consensus among the islands suggested that the major emphasis in early childhood education was on improving the quality of children's educational experience and especially of those who were poor; on providing training and re-training for everyone involved in early childhood education, especially teachers and teacher trainers; on cultivating a partnership among schools for early childhood education, primary schools, and Teachers' Colleges; and on utilising the whole early childhood education programme as a mechanism to facilitate change and reform in curriculum, and hence in teaching-learning processes and situations.

TEACHER TRAINING STRATEGIES

Ideally, teachers in early childhood education institutions should be trained in the techniques of working with young children, but only 50 percent of the islands have any provision for professional pre-service training. Therefore, in developing strategies for achieving these objectives, CECE designed an overall plan of action for training teachers, particularly the para-professionals; for training potential leaders in instructional supervision; for facilitating community involvement; and for facilitating curriculum development and renewal. Most of the islands have systematised the PECE training model of workshops and follow-up instructional supervision for the para-professionals engaged in teaching children 3 to 6 years old.

Of the 4,736 early childhood classroom teachers in the region to be trained 50 percent are primary school upper level graduates and 33 percent have secondary school qualification. To develop personnel for early childhood education, four Regional Training Institutes in *Instructional Supervision* prepared 107 teachers as leaders of early childhood education in the Caribbean, and 21 workshops for upgrading early childhood education teachers were mounted in all but one island. In addition, CECE helped with curriculum renewal and action research activities in 12 islands; in designing innovative programme models for 14 Caribbean countries. The models for training leaders of early childhood education in instructional supervision, and for training para-professionals to teach the 3 - 6 year olds have become standard practice in the Caribbean and in some developing countries. Additionally, in October 1977 the School of Education, University of the West Indies, began its *Certificate of Education and Bachelor of Education Courses in early childhood education* for upgrading the quality of leaders in early childhood education.

Another far-reaching result of the Centre for Early Childhood Education has been the acceptance by the governments of Dominica and Jamaica of the positive results of the Pre-School Education Project, Dominica (1971-1977) and PECE respectively as the basis for committing themselves to the horizontal expansion of early childhood education, using the theories, strategies, methodologies and curricula of these projects. This augurs well for early childhood education in the region. The main thrust in all this was on training teachers (para-professionals) as close to the local level as possible, with emphasis on helping teachers to diversify their classroom capabilities and on identifying the skills needed for carrying out an effective classroom and school-community "transaction" and equipping the teacher with these. It must be pointed out that despite the consensus in objectives and the emphasis on training, there are differences from island to island. These are due mainly to local adaptations, and because of this, extensive and effective exchange of experience was possible at workshops for teachers and at training institutes for teacher trainers. On the recommendation of CECE the Government of Jamaica has decided to augment this training model by establishing demonstration schools as "mini training centres" in each of the fourteen parishes of the island. Five such schools have already been organised. The demonstration school plays an important part as a "successful and systematised working model" for workshop and training institute participants, and for the community. Generally speaking, the training of all involved in early childhood education is "determined by the demands which will be made upon them in the different types of positions and not ...by traditionally set requirements."⁷

PECE CURRICULUM MATERIALS

Because of the high teacher-pupil ratio, the limited facilities and the lack of confidence of some of the teachers in all the islands, the children tended to sit on long benches or around tables. However, the children in some of the islands are now "free" to explore life in their classrooms, and in the environment. It is evident, therefore, that structures and carefully planned curricula are characteristics of these school programmes. The PECE Curriculum Materials (Manuals), developed during six years of experimental work in 552 schools with an enrolment of 33,000 children, are models for the teaching-learning activities being developed in all the Caribbean islands. The commitment of these materials is to the social, emotional and positive self-concept development of the children. Since the young child must be helped to be positively orientated towards his environment, to get more and more stimulation from it, and to find security in his relations with people, especially with those who can exemplify the interdependence of man,

the activities in the Manuals for 4, 5 and 6 year olds are based on Experience Units developed around people in the environment. A similar thematic programme has been developed in Dominica for 3 year olds. The concept-building activities of the curriculum are flexible enough to accommodate the children's past experience, present needs, and future possibilities.

EVALUATION AND RESEARCH

Research activities have been in process in only three of the islands, mainly because of the cost involved and the mysticism that seems to surround evaluation and research. However, the studies conducted so far have helped to promote vitality in the field of early childhood education, to suggest areas of evaluation and to make the curriculum more relevant and appropriate. Included in the PECE and CECE research studies were those which gave an indication of the environmental factors that influence the learning of the basic school child; identified the experiential needs of these children, and therefore provided the base for experimental activities in curriculum content; developed a profile of the basic school teaching-learning situations; compared the achievement of project and non-project basic school and prep school children to ascertain the effectiveness of the curriculum in matter, methods, materials; and evaluated the effectiveness of the teacher trainer model.

One of the most outstanding results of the research programme has shown that basic school teachers are trainable, and they are capable of being made into effective teachers of 3 to 6 year olds. Additionally, the Centre for Early Childhood Education has developed and disseminated a number of evaluative instruments for use in connection with studies of parent-child interaction status; parent preparation of young children for school; effectiveness of workshops; effect of workshops on teaching over a given period; observation of classroom teaching-learning activities; children's achievement levels; and school-community functional interactivity.

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