

PARENT PARTICIPATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE)

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The theory and practice of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is currently being re-examined, in the light of an urgent reactivation of interest and realization of the importance of involving parents in ECCE. The growing conviction that parental involvement is crucial and indispensable in the care and education of the child during the early years has resulted in significant breakthroughs and innovative approaches to the design and conduct of ECCE programs. This article attempts firstly to present a state of the art review of parental involvement in ECCE; and secondly, to suggest a research format for parental participation in ECCE in Sri Lanka.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) herein refers generally to the care and education of the infant in the early years, more specifically the years from birth to five. The use of the term ECCE has been very succinctly clarified by Heron (1979) ; "The distinction between 'care' and 'education' has been internationally recognized as artificial, since all early childhood 'care' necessarily involves an 'educational' experience for the child (even if this is negative) and all early childhood 'education' provision necessarily involves a substantial element of 'care'. It is therefore sound practice to think of and to plan early childhood care and education (ECCE)" (p. 49).

Parental participation in ECCE has been conceptualized at several different levels. Ira Gordon (1969) specifies six such levels of parent participation ; parents as an audience, parents as a reference, parents as the teacher of the child, parents as volunteers in the classroom, parents as trained/paid aides, and parents as participants in the decision making process. Osborne and Milbank's (1987) comment on the status of parental participation in pre-school education indicates clearly the nature of this parental involvement; "In the pre-school education world the concept of parental involvement is frequently referred to, but unfortunately the degree and manner of involvement varies from merely nominal to a total commitment; much lip-service is given to the idea of parental involvement in pre-school education while in fact the majority of children enjoy very limited active participation of this type from their own mothers and fathers" (p. 26). Commenting on the ambiguity of this state of affairs, Topping (1986) contends, "It has long been known that parental influence is

considerably more profound than that of the school. Curiously, it is only in relatively recent years that the creative deployment of this positive force has begun to take place on a large scale" (p. 1).

At the heart of the conceptualization of parent participation in ECCE is the unanimous acknowledgement that the role of the family as an educational institution is natural and irreplaceable. The family is the care setting for socialising the child and the parents the child's first carer/educators. Beside the primary responsibility borne for the child, parents have a relation with the child which exceeds that with other adults in priority, duration, continuity, amount, extensity, intensity, pervasiveness and consistency. Therefore, "the continuation of these different characteristics of parent child interaction suggests that their cumulative impact upon the child's development would be substantial" (Schaefer, 1972, p. 228).

That the quality of parent child interaction has a significant bearing on child development is well substantiated by research evidence. "It has been well demonstrated in studies in both developing and developed nations that variations in the psycho-social development of children are strongly associated with qualities of parent-child interaction. In particular, it is known that when children are reared in homes where there is a lack of conversational interchange where parents do not interact with their children, and where there is a lack of play opportunities, the development of language, intelligence and scholastic skills is likely to be impaired" (WHO, 1977, pp 21-22). Although it is the child's total experience that is significant there is widespread agreement in Britain and America that involving the child's parents in the educational process is an important contributory factor to the success of a pre-school programme (Tizard *et al*, 1981).

Three historical trends are largely responsible for the more recent impetus to emphasis on parent involvement. First was the undisputed failure of almost all ECCE intervention programmes, without parental involvement, to sustain the often considerable cognitive gains demonstrated during the child's participation in such a program. Failure to maintain cognitive gains has been found regardless of the theoretical orientation or curricular format of the programme (see Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The conviction that parent involvement remains an indispensable ingredient for sustaining programme accomplishments after a young child's participation in an early education programme has led experts to affirm that "to work with children alone is to invite failure and frustration" (Biber, 1970, p. 1).

A second source of data consists of observed cultural and familial differences in parent — child interaction. Research into parent — child exchanges tends to point to differences in the abilities of parents to teach their own children effectively (see for example, Honig 1975, Topping 1986). Studies which have revealed that some parental teaching styles, language interaction and cognitive expectations are not conducive toward what Caldwell (1967) has called “the optimal learning environment” for a young child have stimulated thinking about ways to enrich parent-child learning interactions and have galvanized early childhood project leaders to rethink their more narrowly conceived “intervention” efforts to include parent involvement as crucial to successful educational outcomes for young children.

The third factor which strengthened the growing commitment to parent involvement in children’s education was accumulating positive evidence of the effectiveness of parent involvement in young children’s education in influencing early cognitive development and academic motivation (Beckwith 1972; Gottfried 1984; Kuipers, Boger and Beery 1970; MIDCO, 1972; Swan and Stavros 1973; Tizard *et al.* 1981; Tizard and Hughes 1984; Watts, Barnett and Halfar 1973; Willmon 1969; Yarrow, Rubenstein and Pederson 1971).

After an indepth survey of the effects of a variety of intervention programmes, some with and some without parent participation, Bronfenbrenner (1974) strongly concluded;

“The evidence indicates that the family is the most effective and economical system for fostering and sustaining the development of the child. The evidence indicates further that the involvement of the child’s family as an active participant is critical to the success of any intervention program. Without such family involvement, any effects of intervention, at least in the cognitive sphere, are likely to be ephemeral, to appear to erode rapidly once the program ends. In contrast, the involvement of the parents as partners in the enterprise provides an ongoing system which can reinforce the effects of the program while it is in operation and help to sustain them after the program ends” (p. 55).

Schaefer (1973) having surveyed the effects of intervention programmes concluded that a more comprehensive definition of education is called for, a definition that leads to a major new objective for professional educators. This objective would require that in order to influence the child’s education in the home, educators involve themselves in training parents in family care and education skills. “Ideally, profes-

sional education will provide support for family education of the child. Schools are necessary but not sufficient for the education of the child. (pp 9–10). Evidently, it is felt that schools, whose responsibility it is to optimise the potential of each and every child either are not succeeding in the task or are an insufficient provider of what only the community in toto should be offering towards the fullest development and educational opportunity of every child. (Wolfendale, 1983, p. 69)

The recognition that adequate ECCE provision must include the ECCE performance of the parents spurred the development of a variety of programme models and services that foster parental participation. Most efforts have been directed toward two major groups of children; those at environmental risk, and those who are, or who may be presumed to be biologically impaired. Intervention for children at risk because of social/cultural deprivation has often taken a psychoeducational approach, focussing on intellectual development and the enhancement of parent-child relationships. (Simeonson, 1982, p. 635) In this endeavour it has increasingly become evident that the development of more effective and efficient home – based programmes would be likely to bring about maximum benefits. Home based (as opposed to Centre Based, or, Centre and Home Based) ECCE designs are those that base the intervention programme in the home—setting. This is the setting most conducive to the participation of the parent in ECCE; it is also a more practical and economical alternative to the more costly provision of Centre (eg. school) Based ECCE. The most number of such programmes are reported from the U.S.A. many of which are innovative programmes that developed under the Head Start umbrella. The U.S. Head Start, Follow—Through and Home Start programmes are the most comprehensive and widely published of all the world—wide attempts to directly intervene in the lives of the young children and to influence their parents' behaviour, attitudes and child rearing methods, on their behalf. (Wolfendale, 1983, p. 65)

Home Based ECCE Programmes

The Home Start programmes in the U.S.A. beginning in 1972 and exceeding 400 in number by 1980, implemented some variant of a home based option of ECCE by the parents. The initial intention of Home Start was to serve 3–5 year old children in low income families. Trained home visitors, often paraprofessionals recruited from local neighbourhoods made weekly or biweekly visits to the homes, spending time equally focussed on parents and children. Toys and equipment were brought and loaned, techniques demonstrated and parents trained. The curriculum included pre-school skills, health, nutrition and social—

emotional development. Monthly group meetings were often incorporated to reduce the social isolation of families. By 1974 the first follow up evaluations were emerging (eg. Scott 1974); the most voluminous evaluative work on Home Start is that of John Love and his associates (1975, 76, 77). Long term outcomes were reported by Bache and Nauta (1979) and Bache *et al.* (1979). Most Home Start studies indicated significant gains by experimental children over controls in at least some of the measures (of evaluation) adopted in the respective studies.

The Florida Parent Education Programme is a pioneering enterprise spanning over a decade of intense activity by Ira Gordon and his associates. The work is reported in Gordon (1969); Guinagh (1971), Guinagh *et al.* (1975), Guinagh and Gordon (1976); Gordon *et al.* (1975, 1977, 1978, 1979) and Yahres (1977). Community people were hired and trained to work as parent educators visiting homes weekly (of children from kindergarten to third grade) to teach parents skills to use at home with their children. The parents were to acquire home-teaching competencies designed to improve their children's intellectual behaviour, self-esteem and motivation. Curriculum content was flexible but loosely Piagetian and emphasizing language interaction. Raising the self esteem and sense of control of both parent and child was an important objective. Home visiting began when the target child was aged 3 months and different treatment groups stayed in the programme for periods lasting upto three years. The curriculum content was organized into 5 stages or series, sub-divided into specific single lessons, detailed on simple written sheets which could be left with the family. Sequencing of lessons was individualized. For children in the programme between the ages of 2 and 3 years, an additional component was included; two 2-hour sessions per week in a "home learning center" with four other children and two adults, the 'Centre' being the home of a programme mother.

Each parent educator had a 'caseload' of ten parents and was accountable to a supervisor. Parental training was by verbal explanation, written instruction sheet and demonstration with the child. The mother was then asked to practise the activity with the child while the visitor watched. There was no specification of the amount of time the parent was to spend teaching the activity, but progress was evaluated at the next visit. Evaluation results (via numerous tests and parent interviews) were in the long term encouraging. It is concluded that the programme applied early and/or consistently over the first three years of the life of the child produces long term effects on the intellectual performance of the child. The long term effects of parent education in the first year of the child's life are particularly remarkable.

The Mother—Child Home Programme developed out of Levenstein's (1970) verbal Interaction Project. The project was designed to stimulate the low-income mothers of 2—3 year old children to improve the cognitive skills of their children by verbally oriented play activity. A 'Toy Demonstrator' visited the home and presented a series of toys and books to the child and demonstrated their use as a focus (verbal Interaction Stimulus Material) for language activity to the mother. Levenstein (1971 a, 1971 b, 1972) stresses the importance of training and supervision in the success of the home visitors (Toy Demonstrators). Their training included an initial 8 session workshop, weekly group conferences and individual supervision. Guide sheets for each stimulus material were available in the Demonstrator's handbook. Demonstrator supervisors utilized discussion, audio-visual materials, modelling and role-play in the training and supervision process.

Of the numerous projects run by the High Scope Foundation, the Ypsilanti Carnegie Infant Education Project (Lambie 1973, Lambie, Boan and Weikart 1974) involved the implementation of a 'flexibly structured' Piagetian curriculum by professional teachers working with families in a 16 month home teaching programme. It was also targeted to train mothers handle the entire job of being their pre-school children's teacher. Parents are seen as educational change agents for their own infants and children.

At the George Peabody College Demonstration and Research Center for Early Education (DARCEE) Susan Gray (1971) and Bettye Jean Forrester (1972) were active in developing home visitation techniques and tasks for mothers of pre-schoolers. DARCEE's goal has been to train mothers handle the entire job of being their pre-school children's teacher. Parents are seen as educational change agents for their own infants and children.

The results of a follow-up study conducted approximately ten years following an experimental study involving families and children who participated in a programme called Home Oriented Preschool Education (HOPE) is reported by Gotts (1983, 1987). In 1968—1971 HOPE was conducted in the eastern U.S, designed by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL); a comprehensive review and follow-up study of the experiment was conducted from 1978—1982 (Gotts, 1983). Television mediated learning activities, home visitation and group activity were differentially experienced by the different experimental groups, comprising of 3—5 year olds. The composite results of the follow-up study suggest that HOPE affected academic intellectual

outcome in part by strengthening the home learning environment. Comparison with the control group suggest that participation in HOPE's home component may have affected the home environment of the experimental groups favourably.

Home visitation has the advantage of being able to be tailored to the ecology and circumstances unique to each child. Home visitors in the Wisconsin Portage Project (Shearer and Shearer, 1972) provide parents with activities for multi-handicapped pre-schoolers. Parents are taught how to keep daily frequency records of behaviours being learned. They are taught what to teach, what to reinforce and how to shape behaviours by the technique of initially providing and then 'fading out' reinforcements. The child is assigned an individualized goal which can be achieved in one week regardless of severity of handicap.

Merle Karnes with her associate Reid Zehrbaet developed three programmes for children sequentially aged 0-18 months, 18-36 months and 36-60 months. Parental training was in groups, including making of materials to use at home, learning songs and rhymes and many traditional nursery activities. Books and puzzles were loaned and language and fine motor activities were emphasized. Mothers reported back to the group on their home teaching experiences. Home visits were made by professional staff where mothers did not attend. An interesting feature of this programme was the extent to which other family members, including grandparents and older siblings participated. Weekly meetings of about two hours duration were held. Home visits were made every two weeks for reinforcement, monitoring and problem solving. Studies were designed to investigate the ability of teenage siblings to implement a programme with their 3 and 4 year old siblings.

A pre-school home visiting programme in Halifax, West Yorkshire is reported by Jungnitz, Stott and Topping (1983). A 52-item criterion referenced assessment checklist of behavioural objectives covering concentration and motivation, language, fine motor skills, visual/auditory skills and reading, and symbolic and cognitive skills (including mathematics) was specially developed. This outlined the 'core-curriculum' of the visiting programme. Children were visited weekly in the year prior to nursery entry and the project focus was very much on teaching the parents to teach their children. Auxiliary events and group meetings were also arranged. In the first year of visiting the project children (1978 cohort) were selected on the basis of being most 'at risk' and in need.

Many native Indian groups in North America have developed various types of early childhood programme for their young children in the past few years. An increasingly popular type of programme is the home based programme for infants and their families which utilizes traditional Native Indian child — rearing practices, in addition to the modern developmental techniques of typical home—based programmes. Examples of this type of programme are the Native Infant Program on Vancouver Island, British Columbia (Mayfield and Davies, 1984) and, the Pueblo Infant — Parent Education Project in seven Pueblo communities in New Mexico (Simons Ailes, 1983). The common characteristics of these programmes typically include local initiation and development in response to local needs, a preventive rather than compensatory focus, multi—disciplinary content, use of para—professional staff, and the active involvement of parents and community.

In Australia, a home based programme of the Mount Druitt Early Education project is reported by Ball and Braithwaite (1976), Braithwaite and Healey (1979) and Healey (1980). It is an year long experience for 3—9 year olds, with weekly home visits of two hours by a teacher who designed individualized work programmes, with each weekly 'lesson' planned and structured in advance. Parents were intended to 'copy' teacher behaviour in the days between visits. Group sessions for several parents and children were introduced later.

Waksman (1979) reports from Ontario on the Mother—as—Teacher programme. Paraprofessional home visitors present designated tasks in a simple, uniform style. Verbal instruction and reversal role—playing were coupled with discussion of relevant materials and feedback on subsequent visits.

A report from the Hebrew University (1976) describes HATAF (Home Activities for Toddlers and their Families) which provides home based enrichment activities for disadvantaged pre—schoolers via mothers. The later HIPPY (Home Instruction Programme for Pre—School Youngsters) (Lombard 1981; Wail, 1985) is a nationally administered programme particularly targeted on immigrant children from Islamic countries. Mothers are taught how to teach their children using highly structured materials focusing on language and perceptual discrimination skill and problem solving.

Indicative of the efforts going on in the developing world are three projects in Columbia supported by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation (Heneveld, 1982, p. 7). One of these is a programme to train mothers in skills needed to promote the physical, social, cognitive and

emotional development of their children between 0–36 months of age. It was found that one outcome of maternal tutoring was that the children of these mothers were enrolled almost a year earlier in school than were those in the 'control' groups (Hererra & Super, 1983). Of interest is another project to train parents to stimulate their child's intellectual, motor and social development via a set of project designed toys that the parents use in the home.

The Mental Feeding Programme, an innovative approach in the Philipines to involve parents in the education of the young child (Bernardino, 1980) attempts to educate parents so that they can acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills in the proper care and guidance of their children; to train support personnel so that they can assist parents in promoting the total physical, mental, moral and social growth of their children. Small teams of 2–3 man child development educators go to small groups of homes, bringing with them materials, ideas and guidelines. They also conduct training and educational activities for parents.

Some of the characteristics that emerge as salient in the Home based ECCE programmes outlined above deserve consideration. Significant among these is the demonstration of the capacity of disadvantaged, low income parents to effectively assume responsibility for their 'at risk' children's early years education. These programmes clearly indicate that the socio-economic and educational or intellectual levels of the parents do not determine either their willingness to teach their children or the extent of gains the children will attain as a result of parental instruction; that parents can, with instruction, modeling and reinforcement, learn to be more effective teachers of their own children. The 'diffusion effects' noted in many programmes (of benefits reaching younger siblings of programme children, in particular) is yet another salutary feature.

The satisfactory results obtained by parent — substitutes relatives and siblings as educators of the young also deserve mention. In the modern day context, with more and more working mothers away from home most of the day, the role that can be played by such alternative resource persons is promising.

The strength and support gained by parents working in groups was clearly visible. Many programmes held regular group meetings, trained parents in groups and evolved other parental 'networks' that contributed towards programme success. Variations were noted in curriculum design, from the highly structured and specific to those

with less structure and specificity; ones that allowed individualized programme design as well as those of a more generalized nature. Considerable variation in curriculum content and focus was likewise noted. No one design or structure emerged as being more effective or superior; each deserves consideration in its own right, in the context of its own programme objectives. However all programmes clearly indicate the necessity for careful planning, training, monitoring and evaluation.

A research format for Sri Lanka

The recognition (even though belated) of the significance of early years education and the need for the provision of quality ECCE for all is well documented in the Report on Early Childhood Care and Education (1986).

However, early years education in Sri Lanka continues to be the primary responsibility of the parent, private and social service organisations and individuals, and local government authorities. The balance in ECCE outreach still lies in favour of the better off in society. The provision of ECCE for the disadvantaged (urban and rural poor) segments of the population remains a multi faceted problem of immense magnitude and one that should be given priority in the ECCE scene in Sri Lanka. This state of affairs is common to most countries in the developing world; as stated by Ratnaïke (1981), "Unfortunately, financial and other considerations still make the feasibility of institutionalized or community semi-institutionalized delivery of early childhood education out of reach of many children in poverty ridden areas. For example, the largest national programmes in the developing countries in the Asian region reach, or are intended to reach, no more than 30% of this age group" (p. 1). There is confusion in policies, goals, strategies, implementation of plans, management aspects and other dimensions of action for the socially or economically disadvantaged child. It is therefore timely that viable alternatives (to the institutionalized delivery models) for the provision of quality ECCE be actively sought and research effort concentrated on studying the feasibility of such ECCE designs.

If the disadvantaged and poverty stricken children are to benefit by the numerous procedures being adopted in Sri Lanka to ensure "equality of educational opportunity", the provision of quality ECCE becomes an essential precondition. "The principal determinants of any real 'equal opportunity' in educational, occupational and social terms are most laid down in their years between birth and five or six years of age" (Heron, 1979, P. 14); and, as pointed out by Jensen

(1969). "one of the great and relatively untapped reservoirs of mental ability in the disadvantaged is the basic ability to learn" (p. 117). However, this reservoir of mental ability would remain untapped until and unless action in the educational domain "engender the conscious generation of the capacity of the disadvantaged learner to make use of the equal educational opportunities" (Ratnaïke, 1981, p. 11).

The alternative being proposed is the design of home based ECCE programmes that would attempt to develop the child through the parent, in particular the mother or surrogate parent and alternatively, siblings and the numerous other members of the extended family. Child development activities designed to promote the total development (physical, intellectual, emotional, social) of the child between the ages of 0-5 years will form the curriculum content of such programmes. Thus, the curriculum can be in the form of a progressive series of often integrated activities suited to each developmental level. For example, activities can be designed to foster physical and motor development, acquisition of cognitive skills, affective development and language development for infants at different stages of growth.

One example of a curriculum designed for home based child development through the parent or parent substitute is that proposed by Ratnaïke (1981). His focus has been on welding designed child development action into existing home activities or exploiting and mobilising everyday home activities for designed child development. A parent or other parent substitute would engage in these activities with the child, very often in the course of daily household chores, or in the form of play activity. A few illustrative selected sequences are presented, designed to foster Perceptual Motor Learning, Visual Discrimination and Auditory Discrimination. (These have been derived from empirical observations by the author of activities in rural homes in Thailand and in the Khmer refugee homes in the Refugee Holding Centres in Thailand). Some of the activities are excerpted below for illustration.

Perceptual Motor Learning

Body Image (awareness of body and its capabilities — an important step in the development of self-worth ; basically what the parts of the body are, what each does, how we make them do it, where the body and its parts are in space while we are doing it)

- pointing to parts of the body and saying what each does and can do.
- drawing (on sand, wet clay or moist earth), if possible, life size, others' bodies and one's own.
- completing partially completed drawings of parts of body.
- while walking, running obstacle races, home activities verbalizing what they are doing and where hands, feet etc. are while they are doing the activities (p. 5)

Visual Discrimination

Figure — ground discrimination — finding hidden figures (numbers, letters etc.) in pictures; “What is different” in two almost identical pictures or objects (say a few fence poles not vertical in one part of a fence); scanning for a particular object in a temple wall picture or in a tree; later isolating words that are run together in sentences; naming objects from their shadows (p. 7)

Auditory Discrimination

Auditory reception and verbal comprehension — following parental verbal directions for household work and verbalizing the work as it is done together by the parent and the child; parent verbally describing and having the child describe actions, likenesses and differences between sounds (number, volume, pitch); parent asking and answering questions related to the home, farm, community, that require yes/no responses, parent repeating sentences (related to the home, farm, community) of increasing length and complexity and prompting and cueing child to do the same; child learning songs and chants from parents and parents disintegrating these into sentences and words explaining the meanings while repeating the sentences (same for stories); word and sentences games such as “who barks, a rabbit or dog?”, or, “I am thinking of a word that tells us what we use to carry water from the well?” (p. 9).

The feasibility of providing ECCE via the Home Based approach needs to be studied empirically and it is proposed to conduct such study initially in respect of the children most “at risk” in Sri Lanka. For example, a well designed research project conducted with a selected population of urban and rural children at risk would yield very useful data. It is the writer's contention that Home Based ECCE may well

prove to be a viable alternative for Sri Lanka, for parents in Sri Lanka are indeed "prepared to go to unreasonable lengths" for the sake of their children's education!

In the final analysis, the aspiration should be to intervene early on behalf of all children. Ecological intervention based on a holistic approach is the ideal being proposed for optimising the learning and social environments of all children as well as meeting the needs of vulnerable children. Intervention programmes of the nature outlined above could indeed be designed to suit each child's unique ecosystem.

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