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VOICES FROM THE FIELD:

Early Learning in Developing Nations

Let's take a peek at a typical day at Benita Garnet's home day care in a low-income suburb of Cape Town, South Africa's capital city. It's 5 a.m. and the smell of porridge fills the small rooms of her house. Soon she hears a knock on the front door and opens it to find a small boy and his grandma standing outside. Benita brings him into the house and hands him a bowl of porridge. It's still dark when more toddlers arrive with their moms, who depart to go work in the orchards close by. In the morning, the children enjoy music, play with blocks and color with crayons. After lunchtime, some of the local school children drop by to have a snack and do their homework. "The younger ones see this," Benita says, "and they also want to learn how to write their names."¹

Benita knows how to help the children advance, thanks to the training she received from the Centre for Early Childhood Development, a South African nonprofit that gives advice and

support to the early childhood field. The experience has broadened Benita's knowledge, and that's changed the way she works with her young charges. "Before I did the program," she says, "I mainly saw my role with the children as being there to keep them out of harm's way. I thought it was childish to play with them, but as soon as I interacted with them, I was surprised to see them learning. Now I encourage my children to learn through play. Educating and helping them develop is what preoccupies me because I want them to make something of their lives."²

THE DATA ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Benita's children are among the lucky ones in an area with one of the lowest rates of early childhood education in the world. A slim 27 percent of children in Sub-Saharan, West and Central Africa attend preschool. Only the Middle East and North Africa have a lower rate at 26 percent. By contrast, 37 percent of children in East Asia and the Pacific, along with 61 percent of children in Latin America and the Caribbean, attend preschool.³

That's still a far cry from the United Nations Sustainable Goal 4:2: "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education."⁴ The hurdles to meeting this goal are highest in developing countries, especially for children living in the poorest areas and households. Ensuring equity in early education requires curriculum changes, closer family involvement, better resources and more attention to teacher training.⁵

Many early educators in low-income countries lack credentials in their field and don't have a chance to earn them. In the Seychelles Islands, for example, only 50 percent of early educators hold a high school diploma, and this ratio drops to 47 percent in China, still a developing nation despite its economic boom. In Indonesia, early childhood programs tend to rely on volunteers and seldom give their staff any formal training. But even in cases where there are enough avenues for training, it isn't clear that teachers are getting the concrete skills they need when stepping into a classroom. Teachers often lack the ability to translate their formal knowledge of child development into warm, responsive relationships with their young students.⁶

And it's even more tricky for them to nurture a love of learning in the crowded classrooms where they work. Teachers in developing nations handle far more students than their counterparts in richer nations, as the data shows. In 2017, the pupil-teacher

ratio was 14 to one in high-income nations and 20 to one in middle-income countries. Meanwhile, it's a whopping 34 to one in the world's low-income countries. Without a rise in the current number of teachers, this ratio would hit 216 to one by 2030 if these countries reached the UN's goal of universal preschool.⁷

Right now, the world has a long way to go before it reaches this goal. While there has been some progress in recent years, nearly 40 percent of children around the globe aren't enrolled in preschool. In low-income countries, this percentage rises to 80 percent, and it's not just a question of access or the short

supply of teachers. The quality of early childhood programs also plays a role. Many parents are reluctant to enroll their children in programs that won't keep them safe or produce good outcomes.⁸

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THERE IS ALWAYS SAND AND DUST

The expectations of parents often exceed the grim reality of early childhood settings in developing nations. Many centers lack ventilated classrooms, clean water, toilets, books and materials for play, as teachers griped to researchers who recently did a survey of preschools in Ghana. "The wind is always blowing and there is always sand and dust. Also, there is no toilet facility, and it becomes a challenge to teach when a child

says, ‘I want to ease myself,’” one teacher explained. Another complained that the lack of classroom supplies and books made it hard for learning to continue in the home. “You know you’ve taught a child his numbers, and he writes them on the board, in the sand tray, and on other things. But there is no book for the child to write in, so when he goes home and comes back to school, he has forgotten everything that you taught.”⁹

NONE OF THE THINGS THEY TAUGHT US WORKED

It’s hard to make a lasting impact on young learners under these conditions. It’s even more daunting if you don’t have the unique set of skills that it takes. And many educators don’t in the developing world. In some countries, the general view is that educators are babysitters who don’t need professional training. In others, training programs lack the specialized content educators need to work with young children. And in most countries, there are no clear standards for teacher competencies, so training doesn’t provide the chance for early childhood teachers to learn appropriate techniques.¹⁰

For example, a 2020 survey of teachers in Zimbabwe revealed that most lacked in-depth knowledge and didn’t follow developmentally appropriate curricula for young children. Their responses indicated that 45 percent of teachers, especially those in rural areas, hadn’t gone through the type of training that would allow them to connect theory to practice. They also confessed that they weren’t sure how to assess developmental delays and didn’t have any hands-on experience before stepping into the classroom.¹¹

As a result, the teachers didn’t feel that their coursework had equipped them to prepare young children for success. “I have gone to training several times, but I cannot say for sure if what I know is preparing the children well for first grade,” one teacher admitted. “I have not gone to college, but to workshops,” another teacher said, “so I ask other teachers what they are teaching and that is what I do with the children. Yes, I follow curriculum books, but sometimes we do not have the materials listed in the books.”¹²

And going strictly by the book doesn’t work in the early childhood field, according to teachers who had succeeded in earning degrees. “I have a diploma from a teachers’ college,” a teacher explained. “We learned a lot about children and how they develop. But the books we are using in this school are different from what we used in college. Sometimes, it is difficult to figure out the connection between what we learned and what we are supposed to do with the children. Also, I took one course in special education, but we did not use any assessments on our own to diagnose students who need special intervention.” And there was no chance to practice what her professors preached, as another teacher complained. “I am not sure if our lecturers were trained to teach early childhood development or first grade and up,” she said. “None of things they taught us worked, so now I am learning on the job.”¹³

ME, I DON’T REALLY DISCUSS ANYTHING WITH THEM

But parents don’t have much patience for teachers who aren’t well prepared and feel anxious about leaving young children



Too often, parents fixate on academics, as they revealed in the Ghana survey. When a researcher asked what makes a good preschool, one parent replied that it was “an education that begins with lessons like numerals and alphabets.”

with them. In Thailand, newspaper reporting on mistreatment of children and accidents in preschools discouraged parents from enrolling children in programs. A study in Bangladesh showed that parents took a long time to trust child care providers and build enough confidence to enroll their children in programs. In Uzbekistan, parents’ perceptions of standards for teachers made an impact on enrollment and regions with more skilled teachers had markedly higher enrollment rates.¹⁴

So, parents apparently pay attention to the quality of care and education their children receive. Yet they don’t always know exactly how to judge it. They may make the wrong demands on teachers, and this can lead to inappropriate practices in the classroom. In many cases parents put pressure on teachers to limit the use of local languages,

despite solid research that shows the value of multilingual classrooms for learning and building self-confidence in children. Parents also tend to oppose play-based learning, though it provides the best foundation in the early years.¹⁵

Too often, parents fixate on academics, as they revealed in the Ghana survey. When a researcher asked what makes a good preschool, one parent replied that it was “an education that begins with lessons like numerals and alphabets.” Another parent said, “At the preschool, the children are young and so when it comes to their learning, they need toys and cards with alphabets written on them.” And this was the general drift in discussions with parents. Very few parents showed any interest in the value of creativity or play, and this produced conflicts with teachers.¹⁶

Parents and teachers also clashed on behavior management in the classroom. Teachers favored positive and proactive behavior management strategies to support children's social learning. Meanwhile, parents thought you shouldn't spare the rod, and teachers spoke at length about the dissension that arose if they discussed discipline with parents. "When this topic comes up," one teacher said, "some of the parents don't agree with what we do. They are like 'I gave birth to my child, so why shouldn't I beat him if the child is misbehaving.'"¹⁷

Teachers didn't have much chance to make their case for a gentler approach because parents rarely appeared in the classroom. "I don't come here often," one father said, "and anytime I come here, I come with a problem." Other parents explained that they didn't go to parent-teacher meetings or even see the teacher on the few occasions when they went to the school. "I never spoke to the teacher. In everything, I call the headmaster if I don't understand anything because when I sent the child to school for the first time, it was the headmaster who received me," a mom said. And parental attitudes like this led one frustrated teacher to say, "Me, I don't really discuss anything with them."¹⁸

This lack of interaction posed an issue since the best outcomes for children occur when parents and teachers partner, as they did in a community-based program in China. The program began in 2013 as a response to research showing that around 6.6 million

Chinese children aged three and four years had cognitive and social delays. It was alarming data that suggested a clear failure to provide appropriate stimulation from an early age.¹⁹

CHANGING THE GAME IN CHINA

This ongoing problem is particularly acute in rural and remote areas where few services are available for children three and less beyond primary health care centers. The centers that do exist tend to have few age-appropriate materials for early care and education and poorly trained staff with little knowledge of how children develop. In addition, teachers and parents often lack information on the importance of social and emotional skills for long-term success. So, they tend to focus narrowly on having children count and read characters from an early age.²⁰

The children needed their caregivers to take a broader approach, as UNICEF understood. So, it partnered with the All-China Women's Federation on a community-based program for vulnerable children aged three and four in 146 villages or communities in six provinces: Hunan, Hubei, Hebei, Xinjiang, Shanxi and Guizhou. As of December 2018, the program had reached a total of 38, 528 children and 46, 063 family members. It had also trained 304 local volunteers and established community childhood centers that welcomed both parents and children.²¹

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The centers offered a wide range of services to help the families thrive. The volunteers provided the children with stimulation and materials for free play. They also gave parenting sessions and connected families to local health facilities, social welfare agencies, and services for children with suspected developmental delays. In addition, the program came to include home visits for families who needed special support and set up play groups in villages where there was no center.²²

The program was a game changer, according to a 2016 evaluation of 80 villages in Shanxi and Guizhou. The study found the percentage of children under three with suspected developmental delays had dropped from about 37 percent at the start of the program to less than 19 percent by 2016. In 2017, a separate review of 60 communities in three other provinces—Hunan, Hubei and Hebei—showed that 93 percent of caregivers talked more about child rearing within the family, 91 percent felt happier since the project had started and 90 percent had increased the amount of time spent with their children. The review also found that the program had improved the volunteers' knowledge and approach to child care.²³

DEMOGRAPHY BUILDS DEMAND FOR THE CDA®

In recent years, early childhood educators in China have had added chances to hone their skills, thanks to a partnership between the Council for Professional Recognition and ChildWise, a Chicago-based organization committed to the development of young children. Since 2017, they've worked to bring the [Child Development Associate®](#)

[\(CDA\) Credential™](#) to China, adapt it to Chinese cultural traditions and give educators the training they need. The Council's competency-based credential has filled a pressing demand ever since China rescinded its one-child per family policy in 2016, leading to a rise in the number of young learners.²⁴

Demography has also built demand for the CDA in Egypt, where the number of children five and under is expected to grow by nearly a million per year over the next decade. The credential can play a vital role in bringing equity to early education, especially among families that are poor or live outside the cities. Now in its second year, Egypt's CDA program has trained over 100 teachers, along with 14 Professional Development Specialists to coach and assess candidates for the credential.²⁵

These PD Specialists help empower the early childhood workforce, according to Nevin El-Sharkawi, who mentors educators at Futures Nasr City, KG Girls. "Working as a PD Specialist," she said, "has enhanced my coaching skills and expanded my experience in the child development field. I've become better at helping teachers manage their classrooms, apply daily routines and rules, keep children healthy and safe. I'm also more adept at dealing with parents and getting them more involved in their children's education through open house meetings."²⁶

The CDA training she received addresses many of the issues that challenge teachers in the developing world as they try to follow best practices in their field. Its eight subject areas provide clear, evidence-based guidance to work successfully with young children and their family members:

- Planning a safe and healthy learning environment
- Advancing children’s physical and intellectual development
- Supporting children’s social and emotional development
- Building productive relationships with families
- Managing an effective program operation
- Maintaining a commitment to professionalism
- Observing and recording children’s behavior
- Understanding the principles of child development and learning²⁷

FIGHTING FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD FIELD

Educators who possess these skills have a greater claim to the respect and recognition that they should have. But many others are struggling to do their best in the face of limited resources, low-quality training and little involvement from parents. They need more support and

people to speak out for them like Theodora Lutuli, owner of a child care center on the Western Cape of South Africa and a longtime activist for child rights. This year, she provided a powerful voice from the field as she reflected on the plight of educators in her country. “The working conditions, infrastructure, compliance with government regulations and minimum standards,” she wrote, “as well as the lack of financial support from government, have proven to be great challenges for the early childhood development sector.”²⁸

These roadblocks, as Lutuli pointed out, prevent teachers, from fulfilling their critical role in getting children school ready—and she was fiercely determined to work on her field’s behalf. “If fighting is the only way to change mindsets in this sector, so be it. We represent the voiceless as teachers, businesswomen and proud African citizens,” she explained. And she drew resolve and a sense of drive from one of South Africa’s greatest heroes. “Nelson Mandela once said, ‘Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.’ And our aim is to make an impact on our country and the world. We will not give up until there is change for future generations.”²⁹

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