

# Millennium Cities Initiative

EARTH INSTITUTE | COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

## MILLENNIUM CITY STORY: KEY ISRAELI PARTNERSHIP OPENS DOORS FOR EARLY LEARNERS

### Kumasi, Ghana: Early Childhood Education

#### OVERVIEW

Education for children aged 4-6 was not part of the formal education system in Ghana until 2003, following recommendations from the Ghanaian President's Committee on Review of Education Reforms about the importance of early childhood development. These recommendations paved the way for the Millennium Cities Initiative (MCI) and its longtime partner, the Government of Israel's Office of International Cooperation (MASHAV) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to engage seasoned early childhood education specialists from the Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Center (MCTC) to work together with Kumasi educators to develop an early childhood curriculum that might suit Ghana's needs and introduce a more interactive, child-driven approach to early childhood development. Four trainings for some 25 educators have been carried out over a two-year period, and five model kindergartens have been built, with the help of the City of Kumasi, extending the benefits of the teachers' training to some 1,500 young pre-schoolers. This coming school year, the number of pilot pre-schools will double after 25 more teachers, administrators and teachers-in-training receive the training. Many of the original trainees will also become master trainers this year, during a special, three-week course in Israel in early 2011.



Girls play dress-up during class.



Students work together with building blocks.



Playing "doctor."



Several pre-schoolers play house.



The school garden provides lots of teachable moments.

#### SITUATION ANALYSIS

To see how they might assist the Government of Ghana in realizing its objectives in early childhood education, in 2008, early childhood specialists from MCTC, Janette Hirschmann and Aviva Ben Hefer, came from Haifa, Israel, to observe kindergarten classrooms in and around Kumasi. In the course of assessing the learning environment, the team found that the kindergarten classrooms were not ideal: crowded and dark, each with more than 100 students; the students sat facing the teacher, without space for movement; there were no books in the classrooms; and much of the time was spent repeating statements of the teacher.

#### ACTIONS TAKEN

MCTC then designed a three-year program to begin integrating early childhood education into the classroom. This involved close consultation with the Kumasi Metropolitan Department of Education, as well as working closely with a core group of teachers, who are soon to become teacher trainers themselves. MCI Project Manager Abenaa Akuamo-Boateng played an invaluable role throughout, as facilitator and consultant.

The central premise guiding the program is that children learn through play and experience. For the pilot to succeed, the experts believed, changes needed to be made not only to the curriculum, but also to the physical layout of the classrooms. MCI and MCTC representatives, together with the Kumasi teachers, removed most of the tables and chairs and created dedicated spaces for the children for reading, investigation, table games, creative activities and building blocks. Yet, for this new set-up to work, the classrooms needed to be less packed. The early childhood education specialists also recommended the teachers speak to the students in their native Asante language, Twi, rather than in English, for the children to better express their thoughts and feelings and to facilitate more abstract thinking.

The Kumasi teachers were wonderfully open to this new philosophy and classroom environment and came to understand, in the course of the training, that for younger children, play, experience and the use of imagination is not only fun, but also vital to learning and developing the capacity for intellectual growth. Each successive training session was based on what had been taught previously and zeroed in on addressing concerns the teachers may have had in implementing what they had already learned.

#### RESULTS ACHIEVED

In the 18 months since the program started, significant strides have been made. Smaller class sizes afford children both more room for play and more individual attention and teachers spend more time reading to children, who are encouraged to ask questions – a turnaround from the previous curriculum. Children in the new kindergartens are learning through play, participation and imaginative games, all of which have generated a creative energy and excitement among the children, as well as among their teachers, whose role has become a more nurturing and interactive one.

The Director of the Kumasi Metropolitan Education Department, Gladys Amansing, who has also been trained in the Israeli approach, expressed her and her colleagues' delight with the program and their gratitude to MCTC, the Government of Israel and MCI, for having brought to Kumasi educators and children this much-needed, transformative thinking on early childhood education. The Acting Director General of the Ghana Education Service, based in Accra, Ghana's capital, also expressed her appreciation for this thoughtful Israeli intervention and the desire to see this curriculum and pedagogical approach scaled and replicated far beyond the Kumasi Metropolitan School District. With this in mind, the Israeli specialists are currently writing a guidebook to help train preschool teachers in Ghana. MCI has been honored and proud to play a facilitating role in this potentially life-altering project, which can give so many little ones the lift they need to become lifelong learners.