

WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY

Up-Scaling Early Childhood Education in Ghana: Four Years Later

The Ghana – Israel partnership

MASHAV, MCI and the Metro Education Directorate in Kumasi and Accra

In May 2003, the Ministry of Education and Sport in Ghana issued its Education Strategy Plan (ESP) for 2003-2015. The ESP serves as the framework by which Ghana will meet its commitments to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Education. Before 2003, preschool education for children aged 4-6 years was not part of the formal system in Ghana. It was included eventually as a result of the recommendations made by the President's Committee on Review of Education Reforms (October 2002), where the importance of early childhood development and its far-reaching effects were clearly outlined.

In early 2006, the Millennium Cities Initiative (MCI) launched Kumasi as a Millennium City. Since then research has been conducted aimed at identifying the services, resources and infrastructure needed for the people of Kumasi to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Within this framework, a successful partnership was forged between MASHAV-MCI and the Kumasi Metropolitan Authorities.

MASHAV, Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation, with the help of Early Childhood Education specialists from the Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Center (MCTC), one of MASHAV's core professional training institutes in Israel, worked to develop a system of early childhood education, with the goal of implementing it in the public schools in Kumasi and its surroundings. This was done in partnership with MCI.

Four years have passed since the MASHAV's specialists' first visit to Kumasi. We started the project, in 2008, with a fact-finding mission. Today, in 2012, the changes we see in the kindergartens are miraculous. The Israeli model is working.

The tired and bored teachers, working in dark and gloomy classrooms full of apprehensive and passive children, have become active teachers instructing happy and curious children, all learning together in a rich and stimulating environment.

This is due to the hard work, deep belief and trust built, step by step, together with the Israeli team. The teachers feel that they are pioneers, forging a new way to educate the young children in Ghana and to uplift the role of the Ghanaian kindergarten teacher in the eyes of the society around them.

After having experienced the fun of learning through play for years, the Early Childhood Education (ECE) educators have changed their understanding of how children learn. To be convinced, they needed to experience this by themselves, and so all our learning together was through play and active participation.

Together, Israelis and Ghanaians, we produced learning materials using low cost/no cost materials. Together we learned to play the games with them, and then they taught them to the children and watched the children enjoy playing and learning. The games chosen to be taught and learned were basic games that could be adapted and used for teaching different topics and at different levels.

The relationship was built gradually between ourselves and the Kumasi trainees. We planned and developed the project together, based on the local culture and the local curriculum. Doing this helped to push the project forward.

The Israeli team visited Kumasi twice or three times a year to conduct on-the-spot trainings. After a year and a half, the group of lead teachers came to Israel for an intensive three-week training, to see with their own eyes a different way of organizing and managing the kindergartens and the role of the teacher as a mediator.

As this was a long-term project, with the same teams, a natural development was able to evolve. The planning was done step by step, each stage built on the former one, and according to the needs and the learning rhythm of the trainees.

The local team of coordinators chose a group of “leader teachers” who would help them to disseminate the knowledge to other teachers. They learned to work and plan together as a team, a new process for them, and they developed their own training system, which is proving very successful.

The project, which started with 25 teachers, at present includes 130 teachers working in 130 kindergartens.

What did the classroom look like four years ago?

The rooms were crowded, holding up to 100 children of different ages, sitting on chairs of different sizes, in formal rows, surrounded by bare walls with some posters not relevant to any topic hanging near the ceiling. The children sat at empty tables facing the teacher who kept order with her cane. Children repeated whatever the teacher said in English, obediently, without always understanding. There were no books or toys. Everyone looked bored, both the teachers and the children.

Absenteeism among the teachers and children was high.

After four years, what does the classroom look like?

There are fewer children per classroom, and some of the furniture has been removed from the classroom to make space for the children to move about. Children sit in a big circle facing each other and the teacher. They sit on chairs or mats, in small groups.

They are talking, smiling, playing, manipulating objects and playing learning games that the teacher has prepared by herself. The children's work is displayed on the walls at eye-level, and it is possible to see what topic is being addressed according to the posters and print relevant to it.

In the various corners, learning centers, including a book corner, have been set up for the children to use.

There is an atmosphere of learning and activity. The teacher does not need a cane to keep order, as the children are busy and happy. She, too, is happy and feels challenged.

Who was the teacher standing in front of the class four years ago?

She was not qualified to be a kindergarten teacher. She had no knowledge about ECE or how children learn. She may not even have been qualified to be a teacher at all.

Her professional status was the lowest of the low, and her motivation to do anything matched her feelings about her job. She taught the way she herself had been taught in school, by repetition. She had no knowledge of how to teach young children, and in order not to lose control of the large number of pupils, she used a cane.

She implemented the curriculum to the letter. She had no interest in her work and felt no enthusiasm for coming to work.

After four years?

She takes pride in being a kindergarten teacher. She knows that she is laying the foundation for the future development of the child.

She works very hard to plan and prepare for each day, using the local curriculum in a more flexible way, and asking herself the questions:

"What shall I choose to do? Why is it important to do it? How could I do it to best serve the unique needs of each of the children?"

She feels rewarded by the changes that have happened in her kindergarten and in the children's behavior.

Her work is appreciated and valued by ECE educators in Ghana, and she is seen as a successful model for change in ECE. She talks with the children in a language they feel at home in, and she has a vocabulary that enables the children to express themselves in a more spontaneous way. This is important where English is not the first language.

There is an atmosphere of learning in the classroom. The teacher is no longer only a disciplinarian, but she smiles and encourages the children to ask questions, to come up with different answers and to discuss with one another. Mistakes are no longer seen as something to be ashamed of.

She generally encourages the children to try to solve problems and gives them time to think and experience by themselves.

She has learned the benefits of working with her colleagues in a team.

She is in a state of continuous learning, as the ECE coordinators organize in-service workshops and supervise their work.

A year ago, we asked 50 kindergarten teachers, coordinators and leader teachers to fill out a questionnaire. We wanted to evaluate their attitude to the new educational philosophy as it is expressed in their work. The comments were very positive, and they all said that they felt that after experiencing their new role as kindergarten teachers, they would never be able to go back to the old way of teaching.

Who was the child sitting in the kindergarten four years ago?

The child was passive, fearful and bored. He/she often did not want to come to school. He had no opportunity to communicate with the children who were physically sitting so close to him. He could not express his feelings or his thoughts or share them with his friends.

He was present without his presence being felt.

After four years?

The child is active and communicative towards his teacher and friends. He plays and learns in small and large groups. He has the opportunity to learn social skill such as taking turns, sharing, winning and losing.

The daily activities are varied, and because the learning environment is stimulating, he is happy to come to school. The pleasant atmosphere encourages him to be curious and ask questions.

How did the parents relate to the schools four years ago?

Parents saw sending their children to school as their duty, although the children were frequently absent. The parents wanted to see results. They wanted the children to know their ABCs in English, and they wanted the children to be able to read. They were not concerned about whether the children were happy in school or not.

They did not come to see what their children were doing at school.

School and learning were the teacher's responsibility.

After four years?

At first the parents were not happy about the changes taking place in the kindergarten, as they did not believe that children could learn through play. This concept was not familiar to them. Gradually, however, the parents started showing interest. They wanted to hear about what was going on at school because their children looked forward to going to go to school in the morning. They expressed satisfaction with the interest that their children were showing in many situations and the questions they were asking.

Their attitude to the kindergarten teacher became different and respectful.

Planning the daily program: Four years ago?

The daily program in the kindergarten was very rigid. In all the kindergartens all over Ghana, the same lesson was taught at the same time. There was an hour of math, an hour of social studies, etc. according to the curriculum.

What the children learned in each hour was unconnected and not relevant to the child's actual interests or age.

After four years?

The daily schedule is planned to include learning in large and small groups. The arrangement of the classroom is flexible to enable different teaching arrangements.

The topic, based on the curriculum, is planned in an integrated way, including the various disciplines.

At the end of the day the child can understand that there is a connection between the contents of what he/she has learned.

Learning from our experiences has been compiled, and we have written an (ECE) Guide Book that covers all the topics we studied together. This book was born out of the need to provide a written document that could be used as a reference book to reinforce knowledge and also to be used for training other teachers.

For us, the whole experience of working with the ECE staff in Kumasi was a very special, exciting and rewarding one. We feel that, together, we have created something unique. The way in which the team in Kumasi overcame all the challenges and made such a tremendous change in their kindergartens has proved that they have taken ownership of the project and has convinced us that,

WHERE THERE IS A WILL, THERE IS A WAY.

To ensure that this change would reach other cities in Ghana with the same measure of success, we realized that the Israeli training staff had to expand. We decided that each of us would work in a different city and would be joined by a new trainer, in order not to interrupt the process and to preserve the trust that had been built with our Ghanaian colleagues.

ACCRA

Since the project was so successful in Kumasi, the Mayor of Accra made a request to the Israeli Ambassador to extend it to his city, promising to give it his full support. Accra was declared a Millennium City in late 2009.

In 2011, we went to Accra, to meet the Metro Director of Education and the coordinator of the ECD program and to visit some kindergartens. We saw situations that were very similar to what we had seen in Kumasi at the beginning of the project. It was decided that we would embark on the training program there.

We discussed with the ECD Coordinator what the criteria should be for choosing both the participating schools and the kindergarten teachers, including head teachers who were interested and who would support their teachers; teachers who had had some prior training, were prepared to change and would commit to stay in the system for at least three years.

Since then, two training sessions have been implemented. We have had to adjust the Kumasi program, as the situation in Accra is different, and the group of teachers in Accra has different needs.

The majority of the participants had had some training in preschool or basic school, so they had a foundation on which to build their new knowledge. They also had the tremendous advantage of being able to visit the kindergartens in Kumasi, seeing them in action and talking to the teachers there. It was, therefore, relatively easy for the Accra teachers to understand the new philosophy and to introduce changes in their kindergartens.

We feel that the process of change will be much quicker there. We started with 25 teachers and some of the head teachers of their schools, and we are already working with a group of 45 teachers.

We learned from our experience in Kumasi that we had to include the head teachers and first-grade teachers from the beginning of the process. This is being done in Accra and has been received with some enthusiasm.

We also learned that the Coordinator needs to choose her assistant coordinators from first and second kindergarten classes representing the various sub-metros, or local jurisdictions, so that there will be local leader teachers to work with the other kindergarten teachers in their respective neighborhoods.

We appointed one of the members of the group of newly appointed leader teachers to document the training sessions and to video the process of change taking place in the kindergartens. This will provide very good material for both learning and training.

Since the coordinators were chosen for their skills and knowledge as kindergarten teachers, it was decided that they would participate in the teaching process during the training. It is very important to empower these coordinators and to build their confidence so that they can both train new teachers and support the other teachers during the time that the Israeli trainers are not in Accra.

These coordinators were very proud of their new role and put in a lot of effort into fulfilling it.

TAMALE

In 2012, the ECE Regional Coordinator of Tamale participated in the training in Accra. She made a request to the Israeli Ambassador that the project should be introduced into her city and its surroundings.

Later that year, we went to Tamale, in the north of Ghana, to meet the Metro Education Director, his staff and the ECE Coordinator. We also visited some kindergartens. The situation in the kindergartens was familiar to us from visits to the other cities.

The Regional Director and his staff expressed their strong hope that the Israeli team would be able to train the ECE teachers in Tamale and invited us to come and do so.

We also met with the representatives of UNICEF who are working in a holistic way with the communities around Tamale. Having heard about the ECE project in Kumasi, they were keen that MASHAV cooperate with them in providing ECE training to the teachers there.

In Tamale and in Israel, we met with representatives of the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), which also runs in-service training for teachers and is very keen to be partners in the MASHAV training project. The Israeli team reported its findings to MASHAV.

It is clear to us that if we do work in Tamale and the surroundings, we will have to adapt the teaching strategies to the local conditions, which are very different from those in the other cities.

IN 2012, the Ghanaian Education Service (GES) started planning a five-year program for the up-scaling of kindergartens in Ghana. The MASHAV team was involved in the planning of the sections on Teacher Training and Curriculum.

The GES appointed a committee, made up of lecturers at Cape Coast University and an expert from the World Bank, to conduct a survey of the MASHAV kindergartens, to see if the methodology of activity-based learning being practiced in the kindergartens could be adapted for their five-year program. Committee members observed some teachers in the project kindergartens and some in kindergartens that are not part of the project and tested the math and literacy proficiency of the children, using a standardized test. The committee came to the conclusion that the methodology was indeed suitable, sustainable and could be adapted for use nationwide.

We included the St. Louis Teacher Training College, in Kumasi, in the project from the beginning, in the belief that, since so many kindergarten teachers are trained there each year, it would be to everyone's benefit if we all work according to the same educational philosophy and if the training is at least similar, if not completely uniform.

A group of lecturers representing all teacher training colleges offering ECE training participated in a course on "Innovative Teacher Training" in Israel. They met there with the staff of an Israeli teacher training college to build a joint program for cooperation and the exchange of knowledge.

We hope that, since the GES will be starting to implement its program in January 2013, the seven colleges and two universities which provide training in ECE will all work according to a uniform philosophy, as practiced in the field at the MASHAV kindergartens. This will close the circle of introducing change from top/down, to complement the bottom/up intervention started four years ago in the field.

We feel that it was very important that we started from the bottom/up, as the success of the changes in the field helped to convince the policymakers that change is necessary and that, with a relatively modest financial investment, it is possible. Maybe starting the process the other way round would have taken much longer.

Our experience over the past four years has shown us that only if there is full cooperation among all the stakeholders, each with the same belief and desire to bring about change in the approach to educating young children, can such a program be successful and sustainable.

The light in the eyes of the teachers and the children and the broad smiles on their faces gives us the deep conviction that this is a dance that cannot be stopped.

We would like to express our deep appreciation to:

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Written by the Project Directors since the inception of the ECE Project in Ghana

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