Leveraging the Home, School, and Church for Whole Child Development in Haiti: L3

IMAGE:
Maxence Bradley, Photographer

COUNTRY CONTEXT

In Haiti, 22% of children are stunted and enter school malnourished (Ayoya et al., 2013). The vast majority of Haitian children grow up in high-poverty, stress-inducing and inequitable contexts that hinder their ability to thrive. The government structures that help struggling families meet their children's educational, nutritional, and health needs are absent, and children lack systems that enable their healthy, whole child development (WCD). While private institutions, such as the Catholic system, have worked to fill these gaps, access and quality to the support needed for healthy child development remain low (World Bank, 2006). The Catholic Church in Haiti is one of the only functional national organizations that is deeply embedded in the community and home life of young children, running preschools, and primary schools, facilitating outreach programs, and providing advice and guidance to caregivers about how to raise children. The Catholic Church at the local parish level is the nexus of care and the most functional system for WCD for young children in Haiti.

IMPORTANCE OF WHOLE CHILD DEVELOPMENT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

A whole-child approach to development and learning is one that engages a broad spectrum of support systems, including family, school and community, to ensure children and youth reach their full potential. It equally values all aspects of a child's well-being—physical, social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and creative—to ensure they become active citizens and life-long learners. WCD is especially crucial for young children, as early life experiences shape how we learn and develop through the rest of our lives. (Figure 1).

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> Haitian kreyòl is a language rich with proverbs that succinctly and with great wit express deep truths. A common proverb is that if children are being well-cared-for, you will find them in one of three places—lakay (home), lekòl (school), or legliz (church). The "L3" name was drawn directly from this proverb.
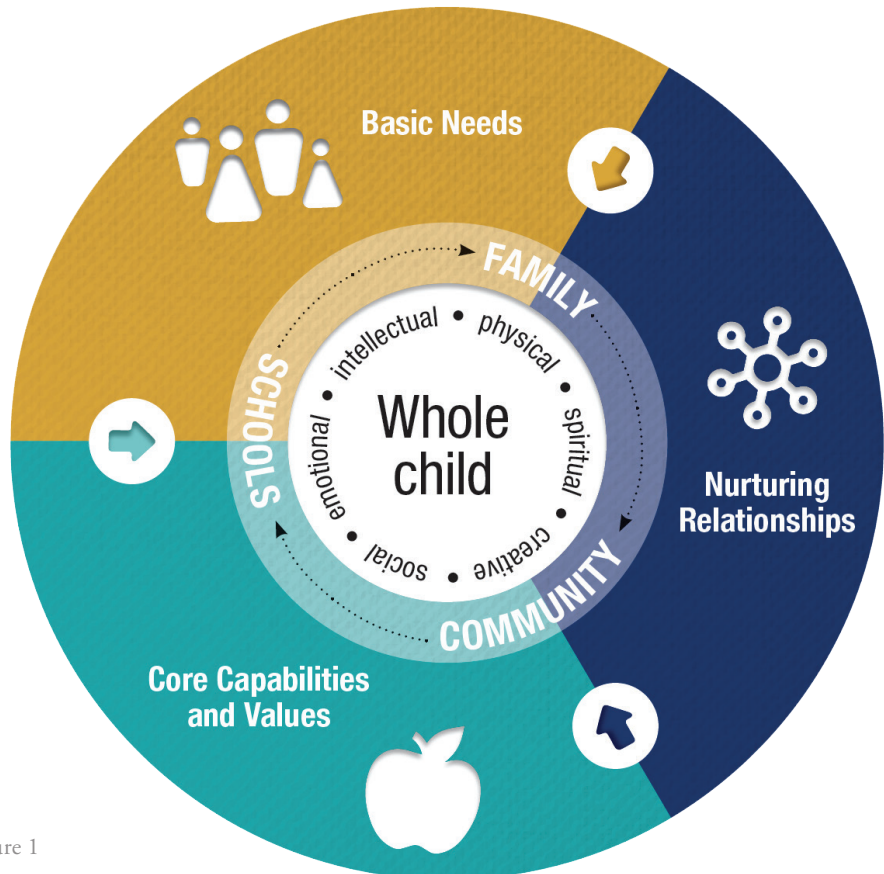

Figure 1

Exposure to toxic stress and adverse experiences during the first few years can severely impair cognitive development and physiological health, having a lasting impact on health and development into adulthood (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Early intervention focused on nurturing care, especially cross-sectoral programs that address a variety of structures, settings, and actors, can positively affect the trajectories of learning and development of young children (Britto et al., 2017). Yet, there are few good examples of how to undertake this kind of cross-sectoral programming, especially in low-resource and crisis-affected contexts like Haiti.

ACTIVATING THE HOME, SCHOOL, AND CHURCH L3 SYSTEM

Within Catholic parishes there are three settings of the social ecology where young children are in regular contact with individuals who affect their learning and development: home (lakay), school (lekòl), and church (legliz) or L3 (Figure 2).
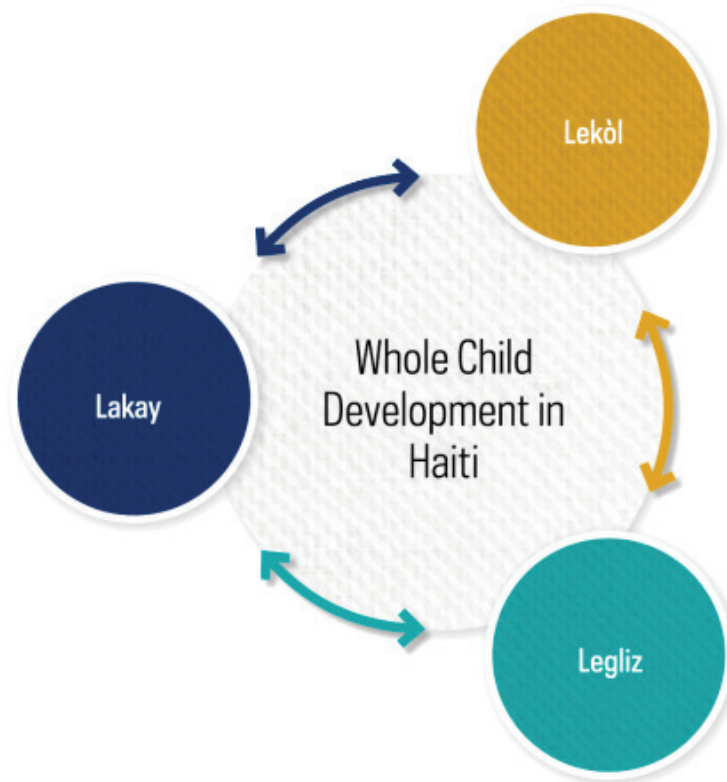
Figure 2

Building on the reality that the Catholic church is deeply embedded in, and has influence over, the school, home, and broader community life of young children, the University of Notre Dame's Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child (GC-DWC) partnered with five parish communities in the Diocese of Cap-Haïtien in Northern Haiti to meet young children's (ages 0-6) holistic needs across the L3. The aim is to not only increase the prevalence of WCD messaging and behavior change within the school, home, and church, but also coordinate approaches to addressing across the L3 to ensure continuity of care across settings. This synchronization focused on five key themes and attached behaviors for caregivers of young children: responsive caregiving, positive parenting and discipline, nutrition, playful learning, and social and emotional development.

The five innovation communities provide a unique platform for developing and pilot-testing WCD programs for young children alongside community members. After discussing WCD-focused needs and developing activities, programs are implemented in iterative short-cycle phases, continuously evaluated every 1-3 months using feedback from participants, reflection and learning from the L3 team, and data collected through surveys. Based on these, programs are improved to better help young children and their families. This model of community-driven learning allows our partnership to gather instant feedback and fail fast, constantly adapting to the data being collected as well as the needs of community members. The innovation communities also allow programs to be developed and tested on a smaller scale before being expanded to other parts of Haiti.

USING RAPID EVALUATION, ASSESSMENT, AND LEARNING METHODS TO REFINE L3 PROGRAMS

Rapid evaluation, assessment and learning methods (REALM) are systematic monitoring and evaluation strategies that employ an expeditious approach to program improvement and design by using timely, yet data-driven, actionable evidence that supports well-informed decision making (USAID, 2015). These types of evaluations aid in the design and improvement of projects, programs, and interventions. A central aim is to provide immediate (real-time) feedback to help with the planning or implementing of a project or program (INTRAC, 2017; Polastro, 2014); see Figure 3 for a visual depiction of the REALM approach. Depending on the organization or project, feedback cycles can be as short as two weeks or as long as a few months.
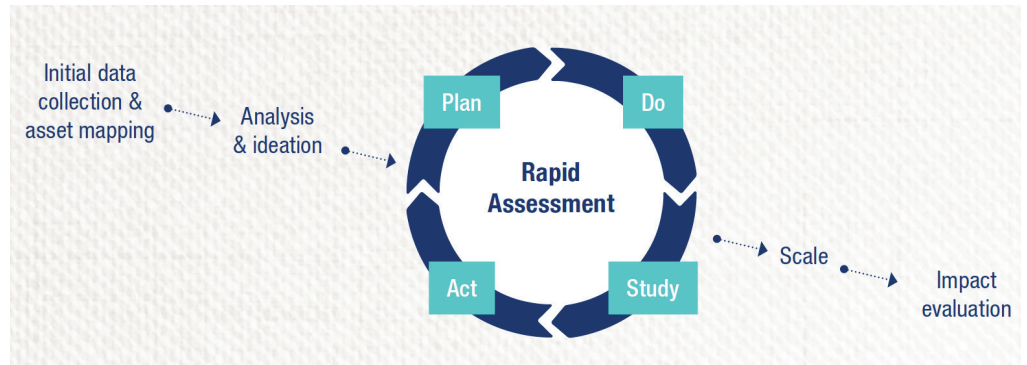

Figure 3

The following sections highlight one intervention in each domain- the home (parent training), the school (pre-K programming), and the church (baptism) in Northern Haiti and demonstrate how REALM strategies were utilized to systematically iterate and improve programming.

LAKAY/HOME: PARENT TRAINING

Families in Haiti face great obstacles in providing for the physical and emotional needs of their young children. Recent social and political upheaval closed preschools in Haiti and families were concerned about how to feed their children and attend to their learning needs. To better support parents, GC-DWC worked with members of the five innovation parishes to develop and test a parent training and support initiative.

Before the program was implemented, the GC-DWC worked with one parish to select community members who could serve as facilitators. These facilitators were trained to lead the parent training initiative. In Version 1 of the program, training was held in the Parish of Saint-Martin de Porres in Blue Hills on three Sundays after mass. Main topics included the importance of the parent-child relationship; providing consistent and responsive care; connections between social, emotional, and cognitive development; wellbeing and self-care; and positive discipline. There was high satisfaction from parents with the training, and many of them mentioned behavior changes and stronger relationships with their children as well as a better ability to identify and manage their stress. Through a pre-post survey participants also reported using more positive discipline with their children. Based on feedback from those involved, Version 2 included a session on nutrition and an increased focus on incorporating play into daily practices with children. Version 2 was also expanded to all 5 innovation communities, had shorter training sessions, and parishes made sure to provide childcare to promote increased attendance.

In Version 3, conversations about cultural identity and gender equality were included in the series of training sessions which spanned 10 consecutive weekends and parents were given audio files and handouts of *Ti Lekol Lakay* (distance learning audio program developed by Blue Butterfly Collaborative) for continued engagement. Versions 2 and 3 also had high satisfaction; through a pre-post survey participants reported using more positive discipline and play-based practices in their homes after the training.

LEKÒL/SCHOOL: PRE-K SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAM

Schools are essential in meeting the social and emotional learning (SEL) needs of pre-K students (ages 3-5) as this is a critical period of developmental growth and academic skill building. Equipping students with the proper social and emotional skills will eventually enable them to reach their full potential as they grow and mature. To accomplish this goal, teachers must promote play-based learning within schools and utilize joyful educational materials to create a positive learning environment. To promote widespread use of SEL programming and play based learning within schools, a set of trainings were developed to introduce teachers across the five innovation communities to these concepts and practical ways which they could promote healthy development within their classrooms. Most of the iterations in PreK programming were undertaken in the training methods and the curriculum itself based on the feedback from the teachers and learning of the GC-DWC team through observations during the training and classroom implementation of the program.

Version 1
First, the GC-DWC assessed what resources and materials were available in schools and used this information to develop training modules which could be presented to teachers in a professional development setting. In December 2020, focus groups consisting of teachers from Port-au-Prince convened to review the proposed curriculum for the pre-K SEL program. Training included themes such as play based learning, classroom assessment, activities such as read alouds, and generating a positive classroom environment. Following this training, teachers who participated received materials to aid in their classrooms (SEL-themed books and the SEL teacher guide), had regular supervision and coaching visits and were able to participate in future training to allow for check-ins and refreshers on the SEL information. While teachers shared positive feedback about the themes covered, the morning meetings, and read aloud sessions, they highlighted the need for capacity building in classroom management. Logistically, Version 1 of the training showed that it was important for training to be scheduled so that teachers do not have to miss class days and that it would be helpful to have a full year agenda of what training would be offered so that teachers could plan accordingly.

Version 2
The second version of the teacher training was largely similar to Version 1, though the depth of discussion on each topic was increased. The training covered a pre-literacy tool used in classroom assessment, the use of morning meetings, read alouds, and cooperative games; it also incorporated techniques of classroom management as requested by the teachers. The second round of training had greater attendance, as accommodations were provided and participants were informed in advance. Getting priests involved in advertising the training also helped to increase engagement as they encouraged teachers to participate and even gave rides to participants to ensure that they could attend. Teachers suggested including more activities or techniques to make the training more engaging, and coming up with ways to ensure it did not become repetitive for them. Teachers were given a pre- and post-test at the beginning and end of the training to understand their knowledge of the content covered. At least 50% of the participants scored 9 or more out of 10 at endline as compared to baseline where at least 50% of the participants scored 7.5 or more out of 10.

Version 3
Considering the feedback from the previous version, a new session was added on creating a positive environment (klima pozitif) within the classroom, which helped to maintain excitement and engagement within the training sessions. After breaks, energizing activities were used to help bring back a positive vibe to the environment which was just one of the improvements that used to increase engagement of both trainers and teachers during this version of the training. Overall, this version focused on the training delivery and ways to make the training more interactive and engaging.

Version 4
Based on the requests from teachers who had already participated in the training, a new pre-K curriculum was created for Version 4 of the pre-K training program. The same preparation process was followed, but this time only Level 3 teachers from all five innovation communities participated in the pilot training of this new curriculum. The new pre-K curriculum guide included pre-literacy (reading and writing), pre-numeracy, and science exploration activities taught in students' mother tongue, Haitian kreyòl. This expanded content was designed to be taught through the lens of play-based learning as an instrument to transform the classroom into a fun and safe environment for children to learn.

After the training, when the new curriculum was utilized in the classroom setting, several clear strengths emerged. Teachers liked that it presented a detailed structure of letters and sounds in a decoding book. School directors said that kids were more interested and awake and that teachers were more active and were always asking for more materials to work with students. Teachers felt more comfortable with the curriculum and it allowed them to work faster because they had access to materials to use in their classrooms, and the practical use of materials helped students engage. Specifically, students developed skills which allowed them to live and play together cooperatively. Teachers also learned from the program, and were able to include topics like animal habitats that they had not known before. In several cases, teachers were also inspired to do their own research to help improve their teaching and their classroom environment.

Version 5
Version 5 expanded upon the PreK training focused on a group of blended topics from Version 2 and the first part of Version 3, with the largest emphasis being on creating a positive classroom climate. This was a top-up training, which was used to refresh concepts learned in previous training that the teachers participated in. During the training, the emphasis was put on the strengths and weaknesses noted during the field coaching of the teachers, which made it more specific to each teacher and gave them a chance to talk more about their weaknesses. Teachers said that the training was more practical, and really appreciated the demonstrations, simulations, and feedback given. They also said that they learned better during this practical training rather than more theoretical training. Pre- and post-test scores showed that most of the teachers gained knowledge about the topics covered. However, despite the focus on the idea of a positive classroom climate, many teachers did not understand that this was something that could be continuously facilitated but felt that it was simply a lesson that could only be applied once.

In this version, teachers were given a pre- and post-test to measure their knowledge and help improve their teaching methods. The average score went up from 11.2 to 15.5 from pre-test to post-test. At least 50% of the participants score 16/20 or more at post-test as compared to 12/20 at pre-test.

LEGLIZ/CHURCH: BAPTISM

Baptism is a unique opportunity for the church to interface with the family as they prepare to care for a child spiritually, but also socially and emotionally. The theology of love and care for God's children resonates with much of the science of whole child development. Baptism is an opportunity to engage the church in the integration of WCD messaging for young children, especially since training in preparation for baptisms are already a standard practice among Catholics in Haiti. Recognizing the leadership of priests and other parish leaders within the community, the GC-DWC partnered with parish leaders in the five innovation parishes to create a standardized guide for WCD messaging in baptism preparation that could be shared across dioceses.

To begin, researchers from the GC-DWC spent time in the five innovation communities learning about how baptism preparation functions in each parish, collaborating with the catechism director of the archdiocese to discuss the standard baptism preparation guide and determine possible changes to include WCD messaging. Ultimately, 3 modules were added to the standard baptism guide: nutrition and social care, school readiness, and positive parenting. From there, the materials were presented to the baptism preparation facilitators in the five innovation parishes. Trainers showed high interest in initiating these WCD conversations within their communities. However, figuring out the timelines for delivering these sessions was challenging because each parish had its own structure for the baptism training and timeline. This meant that the GC-DWC had to work with each parish to create a timeline and find a way to fit the WCD messaging within the baptism training. As a result, the training progressed at a much slower pace than originally envisioned.

Following training of trainers, the WCD messaging was integrated into baptism training in all five innovation parishes, with pre- and post-test surveys and follow up interviews used to check whether participants recalled what was covered during the training. Throughout the process, the trainers were coached through the new curriculum and conversations. A concern at the outset was that there was too much information presented during the training and that parents would not be able to absorb it. However, post-training surveys showed that parents did gain knowledge of WCD principles from participating in the training. The following graph shows the percentage of participants agreeing with statements regarding parenting at the pre-test and the percentage point gain/loss at post-test. The survey was administered at the beginning and end of the training session. Across statements, a reduction in participants agreeing to negative statements and increase in participants agreeing to positive statements is evident (Figure 4).
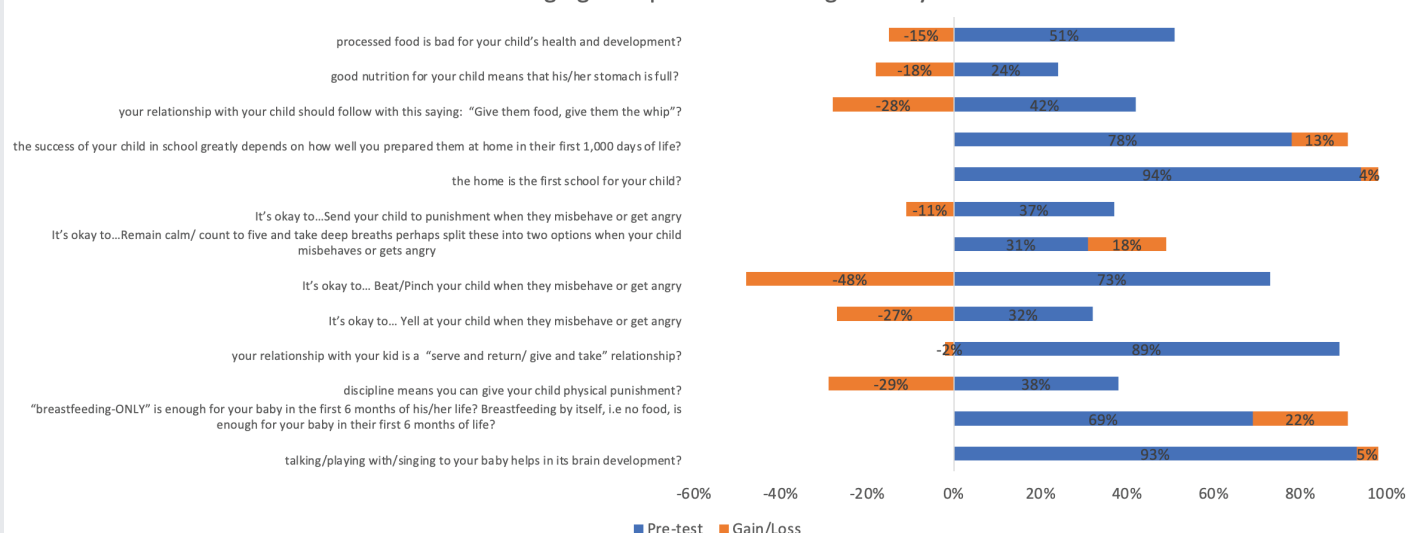
WCD Messaging in Baptism - Knowledge Survey Results

Figure 4

EVIDENCE OF SYSTEM-ACTIVATION: QUIP

REALM supported the refinement and iteration of programming in the home, school, and church, but was not designed to measure whether the L3 ecosystem of the home, school, and church was being activated to support WCD for young children. To measure whether the L3 system was being activated, in the Summer 2022 the GC-DWC undertook a holistic, system-wide evaluation (Qualitative Impact Protocol).

The Qualitative Impact Protocol (QuIP; Copestake et al., 2019), assesses the impact of interventions by collecting narrative statements from program participants. Through the use of open-ended and exploratory questions about changes in expected program outcomes, the QuIP aims to disentangle possible sources of influence by avoiding questions that are specific to the programs being evaluated.

To employ the QuIP, interview questions are developed that capture domains expected to change through the participation of an intervention program. In order to minimize bias and enhance objectivity and credibility, interviews with program participants were conducted by field researchers who have limited knowledge about the intervention(s) being evaluated. As such, QuIP interviews typically adhere to specific 'blindfolding' procedure, or the process of deliberately restricting what interviewers and/or interviewees know about the project being evaluated, including the organization behind it. Participants are asked to share their perspective on broad topics covered in the programming and share what they perceive to have facilitated changes in their lives. Although blindfolding can be useful, it is optional or can be paired with unblindfolded follow-up focus groups in order to obtain deeper insights. In our QuIP study, the individual interviews were conducted with blindfolding applied, while the focus group discussions were unblindfolded.

> *I used to beat [my children] all day, insult them, and their father. Now I don't do that anymore since I learned this from the [parenting] program. I'm not into insults, I'm not into anything like that anymore.*
>
> —*Mother from Acul du Nord*

> *In the training they say that you can give the child vegetables, beans, natural juices, things that contain more vitamins. Then when you have a glass of peanuts, bananas, you can make them orange juice, natural things, leaves, carrots, etc.*
>
> —*Mother from Robillard*

> *I deepened when I, as the teacher, and the students, we know when to control our emotions, how to make children control their emotions, how to get kids involved in their learning.*
>
> —*PreK teacher from Robillard*

The QuIP study was implemented in two L3 innovation communities, Acul du Nord and Robillard. These two communities were selected because they had the most ongoing programming at the time of the QuIP study. QuIP data collection occurred in June and July of 2022. To compose a sample of interviewees, parents, teachers/ school directors, and priests were invited to participate. In order to maximize the utility of the QuIP, parents who participated in more than one L3 intervention were prioritized for enrollment in the QuIP study. A total of 48 individual interviews were conducted: 33 parents, 13 teachers/school directors, and 2 priests. Following the individual interviews, two focus groups were held in each community, one focus group for parents and one for teachers who participated in the individual interviews.

The results of the QuIP are summarized in the Figure 5 created by responses from the parents and teachers who were interviewed. This diagram is called a "causal map" and it shows causal statements made by parents and teachers that link L3 training and activities directly to changes in their own knowledge or behavior. These causal statements from L3 beneficiaries are very powerful, because the participants themselves, without being prompted, are identifying L3 activities as the cause of meaningful change in their own lives to support WCDfor the children in their care. A majority of parents and teachers identified L3 training and support as changing their behaviors to be more supportive of WCD for young children. As Figure 5 shows, 22 out of 33 parents reported that they stopped beating their child after the parent training program. Improved overall family well-being was attributed to the parent training by 20 parents, and 16 indicated that they began feeding their children more nutritious food at home as result of the parent training.

The majority of the 13 teachers and school directors also attributed changes in their knowledge and behaviors to support WCD in the classroom to L3 training. The top three causal links, which teachers and school directors drew from participating in the UND teacher training, were increased knowledge of child development and learning (noted by 11 teachers/school directors), engaging in play-based learning with children in the classroom (8 teachers), and incorporating SEL into the classroom (6 teachers). As a PreK teacher from Acul du Nord explained, "...the newest thing for me is the 5 points of emotion. So, you have to know how to manage yourself so that you can manage others, secondly, you have to be able to learn to listen and dialogue, everyone has the right to speak. This is what we get in respect for each other without discrimination."
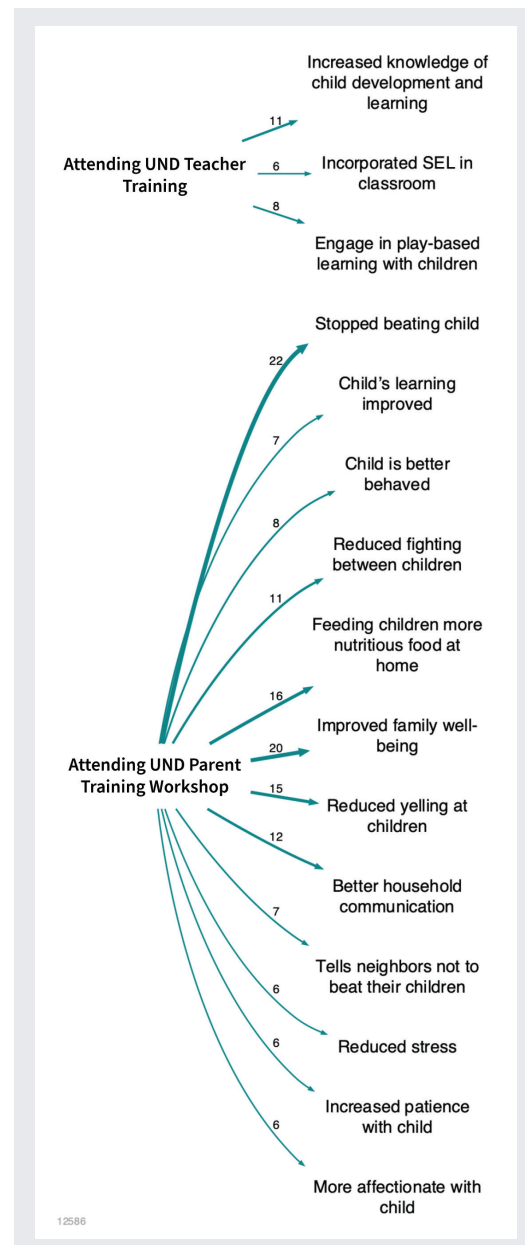

Figure 5

> Childcare means body, spirit, and intelligence. How to feed the child, how to take care of their body, how do you prepare the child to go to school, how to take care of the child's intelligence, how to prepare the child's spirit because humans are tridimensional. And all of this is the parent's responsibility.
>
> —*Innovation parish priest*

The QuIP interviews with the priests in each of the innovation communities revealed that they have a surprisingly deep knowledge of and commitment to WCD for the young children in their parishes. Because priests are in charge of the Catholic school in their parish and work closely with the school directors, the school-based influence they have is more significant than the impact they are able to have on parents through their sermons, baptism courses, and occasional home visits. The issue may be that the mechanisms available for a church serving a large parish with one leader (the priest) aren't effective enough to match the knowledge and self-reported interest on behalf of the priests to support early childhood development in their parish. Some parents, school directors, and teachers did mention hearing about WCD from priests at church, but did not attribute changes in their knowledge or behavior to what they heard. Several parents and teachers did note that the training they received took place in the church itself. Providing implied approval by allowing the church properties to be used for training was a strong implicit endorsement by priests of WCD, but there are certainly more explicit mechanisms by which priests can better translate their support directly to those in the L3 ecosystem.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

The REALM and QuIP studies reveal that the home-school/lakay-lekòl elements of the L3 ecosystem are being activated to support development of young children in Northern Haiti. Parents, teachers, school directors, and other caregivers have changed their beliefs and behaviors to support WCD. Priests are very knowledgeable and supportive of WCD, but the translation of their knowledge and support into the homes and schools under their care and supervision needs to be strengthened. The church/legliz is implicitly supportive of WCD and has room to grow in taking explicit and concrete steps of action.

STEPS FOR MOVING FORWARD:

To continue to strengthen the L3 ecosystem, the GC-DWC and partners have identified several next steps:

> Men need to be engaged in both the baptism and parent training programs. Involving male caregivers has been a challenge in the five innovation parishes; most of the community facilitators, parent ambassadors, and participants have been mothers or female caregivers of young children. In future iterations of this program, parish leaders will help determine how best to engage fathers from the outset, whether that be with father-only training, changing the location of the training, or offering specific incentives for attendance.

> Programs in nutrition need to be expanded and complemented by observational studies of what foods are available and consumed by households; a clearer understanding of costs of food in local markets; cooking classes and workshops for families along with a potential conditional cash transfer study to see how much of a difference small infusions of cash have on the basket of goods procured and consumed by families.

> Work in pre-K classrooms will be extended to additional parishes. A pre-K teacher retreat focused on deep inner transformational work to prepare teachers to model appropriate SEL behaviors and practices will be coupled with intensive pre-K summer camp sessions for students.

> A pre-service, multi-year training for priests in WCD for young children is being developed with the Archdiocese of Cap-Haïtien (in Northern Haiti). Sermon themes that incorporate WCD and align with the liturgical calendar have been developed and will be translated and adapted for use by priests in the Archdiocese of Cap-Haitien.