Investigating community perspectives to early childhood programming: Qualitative study in Nippes, Haiti

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UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

GLOBAL CENTER
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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

GLOSSARY

BDE Bureau of Diocesan Education
CEEC Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education
CRS Catholic Relief Services
ECD Early Childhood Development
FGI Focus Group Interview
GC-DWC Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child
KII Key Informant Interview
SEL Social and Emotional Learning
UND University of Notre Dame

BACKGROUND AND PROGRAM OVERVIEW

On August 14, 2021, a 7.2 earthquake hit the Tiburon peninsula of Haiti, destroying infrastructure, particularly schools, and significantly impacting children and families (UNICEF, 2021). According to UNICEF, more than half a million children in those communities struggled to access safe drinking water, shelter, and hygiene. Additionally, lack of access to appropriate nutrition and limited education support could further affect the long-term development of these children, particularly in the Nippes department that was affected by the earthquake.

As a response to some of the challenges facing young children in Nippes, we launched the System Activations in Emergencies to Leverage the Home, the School, and the Church to Address Early Child Development (L3) project. This project was implemented by the University of Notre Dame's (UND) Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child (GC-DWC), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education (CEEC), and the Bureau of Diocesan Education (BDE).

The project's activities – focused primarily on children between 3 and 6 years of age – included four components. The first component supported 12 preschools in providing quality early childhood development (ECD) programming by training preschool teachers and providing nutritious meals and snacks for preschool and primary students. This component aimed to improve literacy and social - emotional learning for students. The second component provided learning sessions to approximately 550 parents in the preschool's communities. The sessions focused on early child development and positive parenting, which engaged parents in caring practices, feeding practices, and supporting children in school preparation. The third component involved a radio program broadcasting learning content on literacy and SEL - focused programming for preschool children and their parents. The fourth component included establishing five community resource centers, which were replaced by funding parish improvement projects. This change occurred in view of the country's deteriorating security situation, which made importing the containers for the community resource centers impossible.

STUDY DESIGN

As this L3 project was coming to an end, the partners wanted to understand the different stakeholders' perspectives on their key learnings and changes in knowledge, attitudes, and practices, what worked and what did not work, and what could be done differently or improved if a similar project were to be implemented in the future. To facilitate this, we conducted a qualitative learning exercise with teachers, parents, school directors, and parish leaders centered around the following research questions:

RQ1a: What do preschool teachers perceive as the strengths and challenges of the ECD training and ECD activities in the classroom?
RQ1b: Do these teachers identify any changes in their students/classrooms or in their teaching practices? To what do teachers attribute these changes?
RQ2a: What do parents who participated in the parent training perceive as its strengths and challenges?

RQ2b: Do these parents identify any changes in their caregiving practices or overall knowledge of ECD? To what do parents attribute these changes?

RQ3a: What do school directors and parish leaders perceive as the strengths and challenges of the whole program?

RQ3b: Do they identify changes in the community and school around children's learning and the importance of ECD? To what do they attribute these changes?

DATA COLLECTION

To answer RQ1 and RQ2 we conducted focus group interviews (FGIs) with teachers who participated in three cycles of teacher training and with parents who participated in the three cycles of parent training. To answer RQ3 and RQ4, we conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) with a sample of school directors and parish leaders from the 12 preschools and 9 parish communities where the project was implemented.

SAMPLING

The distant locations of the communities presented a significant challenge in convening participants for the FGIs and KIIs. Due to these logistical constraints, we identified communities that were more accessible for participants. Employing a cluster approach, we grouped communities and opted for a common location for the data collection that was accessible to the majority of participants, typically a school.

We conducted three FGIs with five teachers in each group, covering teachers from preschool levels 1, 2, and 3 who participated in the three cycles of teacher training. Teachers were randomly selected from the list of participants who participated in the teacher training. 15 teachers were selected and participated in the FGIs.

We conducted six FGIs with parents who participated in the three cycles of parent training. For each of the three rounds of parent training, we conducted two FGIs with five participants in each group. Parents were randomly selected from the list of all participants from each cycle. 30 parents were selected and participated in the parent FGIs. We conducted six interviews, five with school directors and one with the director of the BDE Nippes. The school directors were randomly selected from the list of preschools where the project was implemented.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was collected in Haitian Creole. Before starting the analysis of the transcribed data, we contracted a Haitian translator to translate the data into English. The translation was reviewed by a Haitian Creole-speaking research associate at the GC-DWC to compare the English translation and the Creole version to ensure that the translation considered the linguistic and cultural nuances of what participants were communicating. Next, we created a master codebook that included inductive and deductive codes based on preliminary information about the project, the research protocol, and listening to the audio files of the FGIs and KIIs. To validate the codebook, two research associates cross-checked each code by going through a few FGIs and refining the definitions until a consensus was reached. Once we finalized the master codebook, we read each transcript sentence by sentence

and applied the codes. The codebook we used is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Master codebook (inductive and deductive codes) used in coding FGIs and KIIs

LEARNING ABOUT PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION	
AWARENESS	Acknowledgment of the importance of aspects of parenting practices or teaching practices to support child development and growth. Or acknowledging the broad benefits of the program.
IMPROVEMENT NEEDED	Anything that participants think needs to be changed or done better if this program continues.
BENEFITS AND POSITIVE IMPACT	Everything that contributes to the children's growth, development, and learning as a result of the different components of the program. Or anything that contributes to supporting the parents, teachers at the schools, or the community in general as a result of the program.
SATISFACTION	The feeling of the participants including parents, teachers, and school directors who talk about the good of the program and explain their happiness about the success of the program.
GRATITUDE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	The statements of thanksgiving to the partners for the implementation of the project and acknowledging the role the actors and partners play in facilitating the implementation of the project.
COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND INVOLVEMENT	Partners, participants, or community members who connected to facilitate the implementation of the project or participants who are aware, or who were involved in the different activities.
LONGEVITY AND SUSTAINABILITY	The expectation to see the next phase of the LEGO project or the desire to see the program continue to reach its goals.
SHARING KNOWLEDGE	Any mention by participants of the importance of sharing knowledge/morals with children or others in their community.
LEARNING ON TRAINING CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES	
LEARNING FROM TRAINING	Any learning from the parent training about nutrition, caregiving, and parenting practices. Or any learnings from the teacher training about teaching pedagogy or classroom activities.
TEACHING ACTIVITIES	Any activity that teachers do to promote a supportive and positive relationship with students. Or any learning activities applied to their teaching method to facilitate student engagement and learning.

CHANGES AND PRACTICES	
TEACHING PRACTICES	Any change or improvement that teachers have made in their teaching practices as a result of the training.
PARENTING PRACTICES	Any change that parents have made in their parenting practices particularly in their relationship with their children as a result of the training.
TRUST AND SECURITY	Any change in parents' or teachers' behavior that has led to their children trusting them more and feeling safer and more secure.

Our data analysis was guided by the Rapid and Rigorous Qualitative Data Analysis (RADaR) framework (Watkins, 2017), a team-based method of using spreadsheets to reduce data into concise data tables that can be summarized. We first coded each transcript in Microsoft Word using the Comments feature. Next, we uploaded all the codes and text/quotes to Microsoft Excel. The two research associates categorized and grouped codes, based on the excerpts, to create themes that were emerging from the data.

This qualitative data analysis was further supplemented with sentiment analysis and word clouds to visually represent the findings. For this, we used a few targeted questions from the FGIs, chosen as the best questions to analyze using word clouds and Bing sentiment analysis. Word clouds were produced to visually show the most common words used in a section of text data. Specifically, word clouds were created using the FGI data separately for parents and teachers to better understand what each group of participants prioritized (in terms of frequency) in their learning from the training. The questions from the FGIs that were used to produce the word clouds asked parents and teachers to name three topics or points that they recalled from the training.

Bing sentiment analysis was conducted to find the frequency of positive and negative words in a section of text data. The Bing sentiment lexicon was developed by Minqing Hu and Bing Liu using a dictionary-based approach. This approach starts with a list of known positive and negative words, then uses a machine learning algorithm to expand the search by capturing and categorizing each words synonyms and antonyms until no new words are found. This list is then manually checked and improved, producing a lexicon of 6,787 English words categorized in a binary fashion either positive or negative words (Liu, 2012). Using the Bing sentiment lexicon, we analyzed a section of text data to parse out the frequency of positive and negative words used. The section of text data used was the responses from the FGIs when participants were asked if anything had changed in the past year in their caregiving, nutrition, or teaching practices. The parents' and teachers' responses to these questions were further coded into 'before' and 'after'. Anything the participant talked about explicitly before the program happened, was coded as 'before' and thus anything that they described after the program was coded as 'after'. The results of this analysis produced two visualizations, one of the frequencies of positive and negative words used by the participants when describing their behaviors toward the children before the training and the other when describing their behavior toward children after the training.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1: Teacher perspectives

Teachers found morning meetings to be the most helpful in supporting children.

Teachers participating in the FGI were asked which topics they recollected from the training. A majority of teachers mentioned morning circle (sèk matine) or morning meetings first, followed by learning how to create a positive learning environment for children. One teacher described:

> *The first thing that I learned was the morning circle which I think should be done every morning before class begins. Secondly, they showed a lot of important games to play with children. They showed materials that can be used to work with children. Then, regarding the classes for children, they taught how to develop an activity for each lesson in class.*

Teachers also noted that the sèk matine led to positive changes because of how it fostered socialization and comfort among children. Teachers observed that this activity helped children "coexist" with one another, while also motivating them.

> *What is interesting is that there is the sèk matine. We never did it before in school. The first thing that sèk matine does is that ait makes children more awake; they feel more comfortable, and they socialize more with everyone.*

Another teacher's explained that the activity not only helped to assess children's needs but reduced stress in children and encouraged them to speak in public. It also helped children learn new words, develop their interpersonal skills, and promote tolerance toward others.

> *Yes, when we do the sèk matine, it is one of the activities that bring many changes in children: they learn how to live together, they acknowledge each other's presence, they greet one another, they share things together, and they work together to achieve an activity.*

Teachers did not recollect or talk about all the training topics

Each successive round of teacher training was implemented with a minimum four-month interval, and data collection took place at the end of the school year (July 2023), approximately four months after the most recent round of training.

While the previous finding addressed the **sèk matine**—the most recollected and popular activity—there were a few other topics that teachers spoke about when asked to recall topics covered during the training. These findings are represented visually in the word cloud displayed in Figure 1, displaying the frequency of words used when answering this question. The words presented in bigger font correspond to a higher frequency of mention by participants, relative to other words.

Almost all teachers spoke about morning meetings and a positive environment. A closer

look at the word cloud showed that teachers spoke about the formative skill assessment (PreSA) with very limited frequency; this assessment of children's early reading, numeracy, and SEL skills, an integral part of the training, was only mentioned twice across all the teacher FGIs. Another important training topic, lesson planning, was not included in the word cloud because it was only mentioned once.

This gap—between important training components and how often teachers discussed them in the FGIs—is an important finding since these activities are viewed as critical components of the pedagogy for preschool teachers by the program design team. This also prompts the need to build the capacity of coaches so they can provide the necessary support to teachers during school visits through actionable feedback, and re-orienting teachers on topics that may need active engagement and support after the training.

Figure 1. Word cloud for teacher FGIs

Teachers found the training helpful in creating better and more effective classroom practices

Even though teachers may not have discussed important training components, most teachers noted how useful the trainings had been in improving their effectiveness in the classroom. A few teachers mentioned that they learned about the significance of scheduling, optimizing productivity, and time management, all of which were lacking prior to the training.

> *We also learned that if we manage the classroom adequately, the children will have more opportunities to participate, to understand the lessons, and the classes will go smoother.*

As indicated in Figure 1, several teachers discussed the importance of time management. In the FGI's teachers did discuss how the training helped improve their management of time in the classroom.

> *Many things have changed after the training we received. For example, we did not know before how to manage our time, but now we work according to the schedule we have, meaning each activity has its time, they are not tangled up. After each difficult activity, we do a lighter one, in other words, we play a lot of games with the children. After the training, we follow the rules that we have set together for the classes, and everything works very well, the children are getting accustomed to the rules, they are*

working better, and it's easier for us teachers.

Some teachers also shared that the skills they learned from the training on relationship-building with children helped their students learn better. One teacher explained:

This training allows the children to be more comfortable with us, and we let them play more often, we also play with them, and they are more efficient.

In the same context, one school principal spoke of teachers, saying,

There are other things that help children grow, for instance, they need love and affection. When we work with them, we don't scare them, we give them affection, and we give them love as if we were their mother. We play with them, and we work with them.

Research Question 2: Parent perspectives

Parents recollected the majority of topics covered during training

Each successive round of parent training was implemented with a minimum four-month interval following the prior session, and data collection took place at the end of July, approximately two months subsequent to the most recent round. Nonetheless, unlike the teachers, parents mentioned and discussed all the key topics that were covered during the training.

Parents mentioned that they learned about several different topics from the parent training, primarily mentioning nutrition, the importance of the relationship between parents and children, and caregiving. Notably, "care" was mentioned 12 times, "nutrition" 6 times, and "relationship" 4 times across the parent FGIs. The word cloud in Figure 2 illustrates the most frequent topics mentioned when parents talked about what they learned from the training. The bigger the font, the more frequently the word was used.

Figure 2. Word cloud for parent FGIs

As parents discussed caregiving, one of the most salient topics was the importance of the

first 1000 days in the life of their children. Many described it as new knowledge that were unaware of earlier. As one parent explained:

The first 1000 days of a child's life are from the time the mother is pregnant until the child is 2 years old. It is the period where you must start getting familiar with the child, you must talk to him in the womb, you play with him, and you touch the mother's belly. You let the child know that you are his friend. So, he is born knowing that he can trust his parents. The trainers also showed us what a mother should eat while pregnant to reduce childbirth risk.

Overall, parents expressed that they learned a lot about different aspects of parenting. Some of them highlighted learning about the different parenting styles and emphasized the democratic parenting that facilitates parents to communicate with their children, and show affection. Some parents also reported that the training covered the importance of teaching their children the appropriate behavior and what is good for them.

For me, I can say, I didn't give my children 100% affection. There were times when they came to hug me, I used to push them away and make them sit down, and if they came to lay on me, I always pushed them off, and scolded them. But with the training that I have taken, I came to learn how to give them affection.

Parents reported significant positive shifts in their caregiving practices and attributed them to the training

Parents discussed and described a significant transformation in the way they approached their roles and responsibilities as parents, particularly in the way they raised and nourished their children. One parent explained:

After five or six days of training, I realized that we were mothers and fathers, but we were never parents. It was while we were in the training that we started feeling like we were parents. We learned how to prepare things and how to interact with children. Before we used to beat them a lot, discipline them, we used to insult them. At that time, we were just mothers and fathers and not parents. Now, we are normal parents.

Moreover, the training also challenged parents' misconceptions, such as the belief that children don't start developing their brains until later in life. Instead, it emphasized that a child's brain begins developing in the first thousand days, and highlighted the need for a nurturing and supportive environment from the very beginning. Some parents mentioned they believe that regular training and follow-up can help prevent problems that may arise in their community allowing them to become a model for society. One parent expressed the following sentiments:

I would like them to train even more parents, do their best to reach many people in the population, to allow the country to have more people trained. This will allow fewer delinquents, and this will also allow parents to be aware and to be responsible for their children just like any responsible parents.

Beyond solely learning about parenting practices, many parents discussed how they have incorporated these parenting practices into their daily behaviors. Many parents

acknowledged the changes in the way they provide caregiving and feed their children. One parent explained:

> My experience is that before the training I used to mistreat my child, but after that we became good friends. If the child has a problem, he will explain it to me, he started to trust me as a parent and he is now more comfortable with me.

A few parents spoke about building relationships with their children through playing together, which helped them build a connection and trust. The parents were pleased to see how these relationships were leading to their children feeling safe and secure with their family and in the home. Parents expressed that their relationship with their children was strengthened through shared dialogue as well as through participating in activities of play.

> Before the training we didn't care about playing games with the children and we would not even let them play. But now we are the ones to come up with some games for the children because, in the parent training, they told us games are not just an activity that helps the children relax but they also teach them many things like vocabulary, rhymes, mathematics, and many other things. That's why I am always with my child when he plays, first to keep an eye on him and second to learn more about the game he wants to play.

Many parents also reported a change in the way they feed their children and the type of food they prepared for them. Many parents reported that these changes have resulted in children eating healthier, gaining weight and even reporting their children being sick less often.

> My son did not gain any weight before but after the training, I changed the way I used to feed him and now he's gained weight.

To understand these shifts better, we conducted a sentiment analysis using participant responses to the question about any changes in their caregiving or feeding practices towards children in the past year. The words are sorted by the frequency with which they appear in the text. When discussing their caregiving prior to the training, the most common words were all negative: "insult", "scream", "punish" and "lie". After the training, the most common words were all positive words: "trust", "affection", "support", and "strong" (see Figure 3 on the next page).
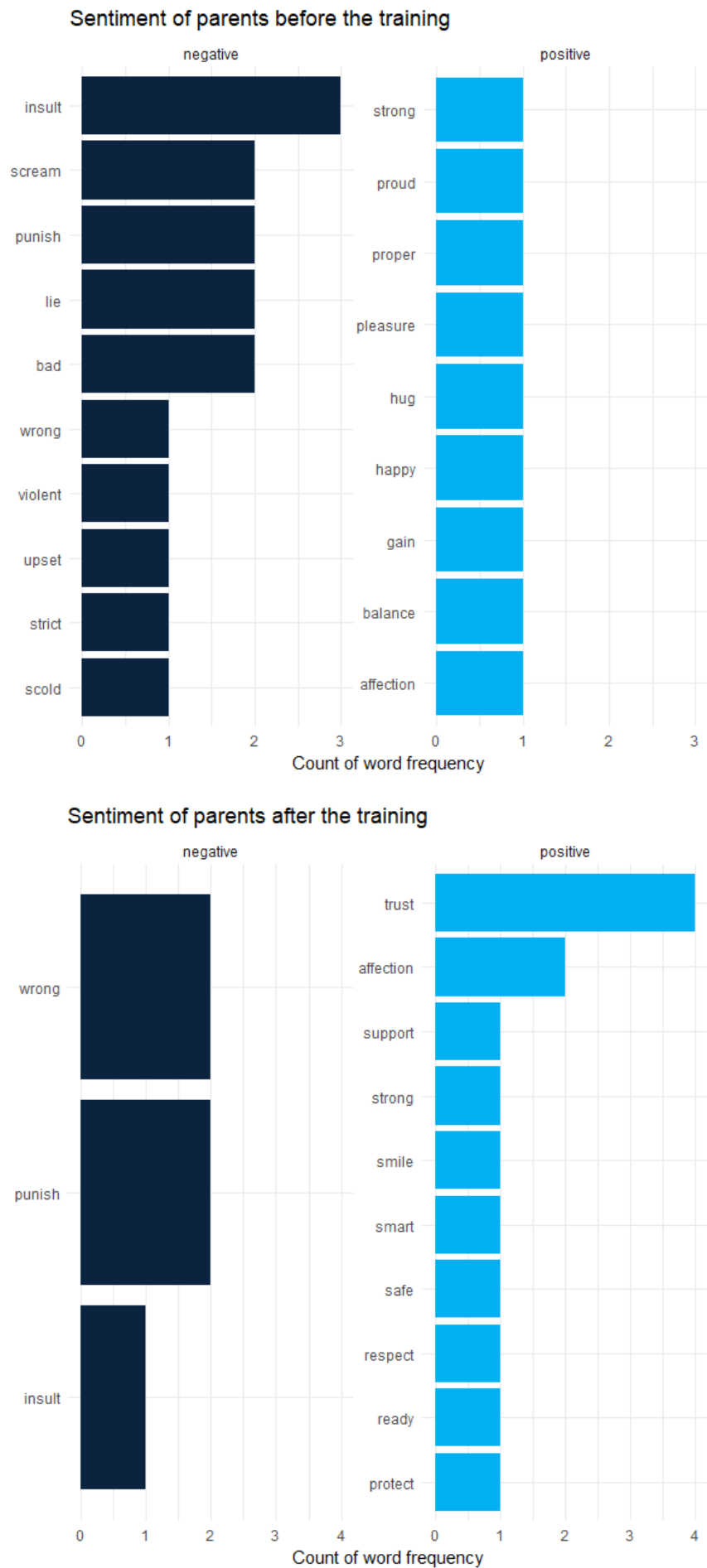
Figure 3. Sentiment analysis of retrospective parent responses before and after training

There is a gap in fathers' participation in the training

Even though the parent training was not designed specifically for mothers, 83% of participants in the training were women. The number of mothers and fathers who participated in each cycle of the parent training is presented in table II.

Table 2. Number of mothers and fathers in each cycle of parent training

PARTICIPANTS	MOTHER	FATHER	TOTAL
Cycle 1	154	26	180
Cycle 2	146	34	180
Cycle 3	147	33	180

Therefore, the focus groups were not able to capture the perspectives of fathers very well due to the shortage of fathers' involvement in the training. However, one male participant expressed a change in his approach to fatherhood and the family. This insight shows the importance of fathers in creating a better home environment for children. The father noted:

What changed in my home is the relationship between me and my wife. My child is here, and it is as if my wife is the only one who educates him. I went to work, and I did not have time for the family. Since the program, now my wife and I share the work. I support my wife and my child, and it seems that he's become my good friend now. I created time for us to play together but I didn't know how to do this before. Things have changed.

Research Question 3: School director and parish leader perspectives

Parish and school leaders see value in continuing and scaling the teacher and parent training programs

Several parish and school leaders highlighted the need to continue training for teachers and parents. They expressed the need for more resources to support teachers and parents to implement the learnings from the training.

As I said earlier, training is never too much. It is important to keep improving because in general if you don't have ongoing training it could cause some problems later. We would like to have more training resources. What I am hoping for is that teachers apply what they've learned but also have the necessary tools and materials to pass on their learning experience.

Most participants also emphasized the need to improve the scope of future teacher training to help teachers develop new skills. However, participants did not specify a particular skill or topic they would want to see covered in the training. In almost every interview, participants showed great interest in targeting a broader audience, especially in more rural parts of the country.

What I would like is to have more training so that more people can have access to it because it is not taking place in remote areas where the radio cannot reach all areas. I would like the training not only on the radio but if they can go to all remote areas to train more people, it will be even better.

Parish and school leaders' observations align with the learnings and experiences shared by parents and teachers

Echoing what parents shared during the focus groups, the parish and school leaders spoke about the positive changes in parent-child relationships in their observations and interactions. One participant noted:

…children are more comfortable at home with their family, mother, and father. They know that they will not be subjected to violence again. There is a bond and friendship in the family.

School leaders also shared the overall positive changes observed in children and improvement in their education, health, social skills, and overall well-being. Some of the school leaders noted how the meal distribution program in schools helped children focus and learn.

One cannot learn on an empty stomach. Snacks and food for our children are truly extraordinary things here in our locality. In fact, it is one of the needs that we cannot afford. Now the children come to school every day expecting to find something to eat, and the teachers and parents know that the children have something to eat.

While not all participants spoke about it, a few school leaders noted that the alignment in key messaging about issues such as discipline and the importance of ECD across the parent and teacher training ensured that children did not learn or experience contradictory things at home and at school. This is a key learning since it reiterates the importance of activating all key systems that affect a child's development and not just the home or the school.

They are now much more in touch with the school and one of the things that we saw is that before we had the impression that the school was asking the students to follow some guidelines and the parents were undoing what we were doing. Now, since the training they seem to go along with the school guidelines, and they encourage their children to follow them.

School leaders highlighted the importance of streamlining program logistics

In the KIIs, participants highlighted several improvements required for the radio program to be more effective. They stated the importance of better coordination by expanding the broadcasting timeframe and including a schedule that accommodates everyone. One school leader declared that:

Sometimes, the whole family cannot listen to the entire program together so it would be a good idea to schedule a specific time where all family members can gather to follow it together. For instance, older people in the family like fathers must go gardening and/or grazing. We'd rather see all family members get together to listen to the program. We need to make sure that there is a rechargeable device that will last longer.

One school leader also highlighted difficulties associated with the school feeding program, specifically pertaining to food delivery. Given constraints within the country, he asserted that it is critical to facilitate timely accessibility to the funds to help them coordinate without pressure.

Since the canteen brings a lot of changes for the children, what I would like is that before school starts [you] plan to wire transfer the money ahead of time. This will allow us to plan for the food on time. Sometimes, it is difficult to receive the money, or the money comes late. We have to borrow money to make the canteen work. It would be good if they sent the money on time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings described above, we have five recommendations to consider with future similar programming in Haiti.

Improve fathers' participation in the parent training program

While the parent training program did not explicitly focus on mothers, it was predominantly attended by women. Fathers in Haiti have considerable influence over the decisions that are made in the home in terms of young children's nutrition, health, learning, and discipline. In order to better address the learning and development of young children in Haiti, projects need to more actively involve fathers. To involve fathers more effectively in the future it is important to first understand their motivations for and against attending parent training sessions. We can incorporate this knowledge into developing fit-for-purpose father engagement sessions by manipulating the time of sessions, how they are advertised, and the topics that are covered.

Continue to build on the strengths of the program components by aligning both implementation and content delivered at home and school

Even though not a lot of participants spoke about the alignment of messaging, consistent messaging about ECD and related practices to not only schools but also parents leads to success. Fine-tuning the content to make this alignment intentional and ensuring all the parents of students in the preschool classrooms are covered through parent training could help strengthen the program overall.

Strengthen coaches' capacity to support teachers in the classroom

While coaches are trained to train teachers in ECD activities and to collect data, it is vital for the program's success to strengthen the capacity to provide teachers with actionable feedback. During GC-DWC and CRS teams' school visits, we noted that teachers struggled with lesson planning and classroom management. The data from the focus groups about the gaps in what teachers could recall substantiates this. Understanding that the coaches are best placed to improve teacher capacity on a regular basis and laying out processes to help coaches work with teachers better will ensure program success and fill any knowledge gaps the teachers might have.

Improve communication around logistics with the school leaders

While the school leaders expressed positive and high levels of satisfaction with the program, a few school leaders noted that there was a gap in communication about the number of hot meals required per school. Communicating with the schools regularly to plan for fluctuating enrollment in schools and having a plan to address the increase in demand for meals within schools will help iron out any gaps in logistics.

Identify and create champions in the communities to ensure sustainability

Many participants expressed interest in having the program continue and also discussed the importance of knowledge sharing. Identification of school and parish leaders, teachers, and parents who could continue the work with the lessons and knowledge gained would ensure sustainability beyond the life of the project. Talking to these identified champions to understand the avenues where knowledge sharing can occur (e.g. at church, in community meetings) without adding additional resources or time could help teachers and parents to sustain the encouraging changes in knowledge and practices reported.

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