

Presentations of the Global Leaders' projects in Reggio Emilia
(13-15 September 2010)

General considerations
(Made on 15 September, and completed from notes by mid-November 2010)
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1 - The projects reported by the Global leaders represent an impressive array of actions undertaken to promote early childhood in national settings. Practically all of them were marked by concrete achievements, made possible through high quality commitment. They can be roughly organised in four categories¹:

A. Initiatives addressing the national level, with a focus on policies:

- 1) Working with the legislative process in Brazil: full-fledged and successful lobbying to stop the adoption of a law (to include 5 years old in the compulsory education system) because it was deemed detrimental at the current status of pre-schooling.
- 2) Driving the elaboration of national policy on early childhood in Lebanon: activating the collective process through specialised working groups, involving both the public sector and civil society.
- 3) Attempting to establish national tools for gathering relevant data in Poland: a task requiring bigger resources; discovery of existing data in the process.
- 4) Creating a structure for coordination among key ECCD actors in Uganda.
- 5) Advancing the work for a national policy in India (1) through interaction between local, state and federal levels.

B. Creating a "movement" to expand the constituencies of actors working for early childhood:

- 6) Creating a national platform in India (2) and establishing an alliance with the professional bodies in the health sector, namely the association of paediatricians. Two purposes: campaigning and spreading good practice.
- 7) Organising and nurturing coordination and mutual support among early childhood actors within academia in India (3).

C. Raising the profile of ECCD within a community:

- 8) Campaign (the 'movement in green') for raising the social and public sector awareness of the importance of ECCD in Fiji.
- 9) Educating the private sector for increasing investment in early childhood in a couple of States in the USA.

¹ This categorisation is pragmatic and can be done differently with other criteria. The projects are listed at random..

D. Expanding knowledge and good practice:

10) A published book in Holland, distilling the scientific knowledge on the development of the brain, and making it accessible to practitioners.

11) A manual and initial training for teachers in Mexico (1) integrating a spiritual dimension into the professional training of teachers in ECCD.

12) A manual and initial training to refine methods of “listening to children” in Mexico (2)².

13) Introducing health and safety measures for children in deprived communities in Kenya.

14) Working towards healthy environment and promoting healthy behaviours in a deprived community in Ghana.

A couple of general observations:

- In all projects, there were elements of advocacy, and they ranged from mobilising local officials to help in creating healthy environments, to lobbying politicians and parliamentary commissions examining a piece of legislation. Although the dose and sophistication of advocacy varied in content and intensity, the choice of initiatives was always done through an assessment of an urgent need and the capacity that can be mobilised to address it effectively in a given context.

- Leadership has also been exercised in all projects: clarity of purpose, mobilisation of relevant actors, working as catalysts of a process, providing the professional knowledge and competence required by the type of action undertaken, learning in the process...

2 - A couple of remarks as we try to learn about the Reggio Emilia “model”, and as we use it as a “sounding board” in our reflection on the Global Leaders’ projects and their contexts:

2.1 - Methodologically, it is important, when we try to learn from the ECCD experience in Reggio Emilia, and compare it with newer initiatives and systems, to put this experience:

- In perspective: i.e. remember that the venture started soon after WW2, has had an inspirational leader at an early stage, has had a long time to accumulate knowledge and good practice to the current levels, etc.

- In context: Reggio Emilia is one of the five wealthiest cities/regions in Italy, with the privilege of having a centre left local government, and a practice rooted in small industries, a well established union/cooperative movement, etc. As the mayor said: the success is also due to sustained public-sector-led investment in education and early childhood..

2.2 - The model can be learned from in at least two ways:

² This initiative inspired the global leaders to follow up with a joint project focusing on “listening to children”, which is in process of implementation.

- Generally, ECCD professionals visiting Reggio Emilia focus on the theory, methodology and practice related to the “project approach” when working with children, families, the community, etc. We have learned some about this, of course.

- But it is no less important to study the politics and history of the movement that has built the model and continues to care for its renewal: for example, collective leadership and collective approaches (led, on the face of it, by women, who very often replaced each other with equal competence to talk to us..), a capital of knowledge continuously in progress, evidence based cumulative research for adjusting policy and practice, strategic insertion into the political and administrative structures of local government, positioning within the national levels, in particular concerning the politics of education, a policy of interacting with the global early childhood scene, etc.

3 - Considerations on advocacy and leadership, drawn from the project experiences (every consideration can be related to one or more of the projects).

3.1 - The search for the “right idea” for an advocacy project generally started with an overview of the status of early childhood either in the local community, or in the country, or both. Examples related to “knowing the context”:

- The social and political conditions, including such components as the national debate regarding the “philosophy” of education
- Sets of relevant data, and a continuous process to improve the tools for their collection and analysis
- Considering the context over time, as a reality in progress
- Building such knowledge is a process, cumulative and collective..

Hypothesis 1

Even as an individual, an ECCD leader has to develop the skills to a) find the information and b) contribute to its accumulation, for building the “overview”.

3.2 - Positioning the project. Here are some obvious distinctions of circles/levels, which can help in refining the “clarity of purpose”:

- Local (municipal), state/province or national levels, and very often the interaction among such levels, and between the national and the global
- Public sector, civil society or private/corporate sector, or a combination
- The continuum from legislation, through policy and the practice of the administration, to social awareness and good practices at community level...

Hypothesis 2

The experience of Reggio Emilia and of several projects seems to indicate that working towards the right policy and practice can be done most effectively at the municipal level: should the early childhood movement give priority to working with the structures that are generally called “local authorities”, and to “decentralising” the mandate for ECCD?

Hypothesis 3

It is important to maintain the articulation between serendipity (i.e. taking advantage of opportune factors/events/moments relevant to the “project”) and strategy (i.e. keeping in sight the strategic goals to be achieved in the long term).

3.3 - Broad components of advocacy.

- Any advocacy initiative can be placed within a continuum of activities that support each other in advancing the case for ECCD within the national context.

- The continuum could be roughly seen as follows: accumulation and dissemination of knowledge and expertise (science of child development, evidence based and action research results, statistical data, etc.); spreading awareness among the stakeholders (campaigns targeting children, parents, the community, etc); promoting the positive contribution of ECCD to national development within public opinion (the economic and social argument, etc); lobbying decision-makers in the legislative and/or executive realms (engaging lobbyists, building alliances, mobilising champions, etc.).

- The continuum can of course be refined further, but at whatever stage it is placed, successful advocacy requires:

a) Clarity of purpose, and if the purpose is “intermediary”, its positioning within a strategic perspective to be achieved over time.

b) The professional competence to be able to “put the case”, nurture the content, respond to questions and objections, etc.

c) The array of tools needed for the specific initiative (popular mobilisation, engaging professional bodies, media campaign, Internet networking, use of champions/celebrities, reference to international conventions, etc.)

Hypothesis 4

Knowledge of, and familiarity with the authoritative global conventions (CRC and GC7, the EFA mechanisms, the MDGs, etc.) is crucial when advocating for early childhood in policy and practice at the national level.

Hypothesis 5

Expertise in the use of the Internet networking tools that are well established now, has proven to be a crucial factor of success in certain contexts. However, this medium is not a “panacea” for all situations, and some contexts in the majority world are still far from ready for using it effectively.

4. In conclusion

Let's look at ourselves as actors within a global and growing movement for ECCD, still “in formation” in many respects, and in search of a common yet multifaceted strategy. The challenge is to root advocacy for early childhood within the national context of development, particularly in the majority world, with a focus on the marginalised. But let's never lose sight of children and families as our ultimate target, within the concrete context of a local community.