
Capacity Building

Study Tour for African Policy Makers

Study Tour to Mexico March 13–17, 2000

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March 13–17, 2000, an African delegation of 25 education specialists and government officials from Cape Verde, Guinea, Mali, Rwanda, Senegal, and Chad visited Mexico to look at the country's policies, practices, and experiences related to ECD programs. The African countries selected were characterized by being at a very early stage of designing and developing ECD programs or project components. The activity was jointly sponsored by the World Bank's Africa Region ECD Team, the Mexico Country Management Unit (LCC1C), and the *Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo* (CONAFE), Mexico. CONAFE is a private agency recognized as a leader in Mexico's nonformal preschool efforts. Its programs, often designed as a community-based model, extend educational opportunities to remote rural areas reaching out to poor children, indigenous groups, and children of migrant farm workers.

The objective of the study tour was to provide an opportunity for ECD program managers and policy makers from Africa to learn more about the implementation of low-cost, community-based ECD programs in rural areas. Specifically, this included opportunities to (a) review the different components of training programs for ECD caregivers, (b) see different models of parent and community intervention, (c) become familiar with a particular example of interinstitutional collaboration and mechanism of cooperation between education and health programs, and (d) investigate the link between ECD community-based programs and community primary schools.

These learning objectives derived from the need for African countries to identify low-cost, high-quality program options to be able to provide services to an increasing number of poor children in rural areas. The programs visited gave the participants the opportunity to interact with consolidated community-based projects that emphasize a child-centered pedagogy and an integrated ECD approach by combin-

ing health, nutrition, early stimulation, and educational interventions. At the same time, the programs chosen presented a low-cost model to reach out to the rural areas of Mexico.

The study tour applied a combination of different learning methods, including presentations from international and Mexican ECD experts, roundtable discussions, presentations from participants, site visits, and report writing. Before they arrived, participants were asked to prepare a summary of the ECD-related initiatives in their own countries. This helped them to reflect upon their own practices and to work within a framework to evaluate their learning experiences during the study tour. Two full days of site visits complemented presentations by CONAFE. During the site visits, participants were able to observe how young teachers manage multilevel classrooms applying a child-centered pedagogy. The curriculum included different play-oriented approaches to teach math, sciences, social sciences, nutrition, health care, and environmental protection. Parent education sessions illustrated the implementation of programs targeted to children ages zero to three years. In addition, all programs presented a high level of community participation in ECD and primary school programs.

Lessons Learned

- **Good-quality teacher training** is a key element of successful implementation of CONAFE's initiatives. The model is based on selecting young, committed people from the local community and training them as teachers. These young students are semi-volunteers who receive a scholarship to continue higher education after having worked in a poor community for at least two years. When they start, they receive two months of intensive training followed by in-service pedagogical support and supervision during the two years. A full range of teaching materials, guidelines for planning their teaching activities, teaching manuals, textbooks, and reference materials support their work. At the end of the two-year service, they receive a scholarship for up to five years to pursue a higher education degree. In addition, they may also remain with the program as tutors or supervisors of new teachers.
- **Community participation** was identified as another key factor. The successful involvement of the community in the day-to-day running of the preschools and primary schools is an important element of the CONAFE program. Different interest groups involved in the program, such as parents, local authorities, health promoters, teachers, and the communities, all show interest, commitment, and pride in the program. This level of community support is critical to sustain the schools. It was noted, however, that community participation is a two-way process: only when schools are encouraging community participation do parents and families develop the willingness to participate in school activities. In most African countries, the prevailing model is formal preschool education, which does not encourage parent participation in schools.
- **Decentralization and the integration of ECD and community schools** at the local level were other features leading to success that the participants identified. One

of the big challenges in Africa is to integrate community-driven programs into mainstream education initiatives. This requires efforts from different levels for effective collaboration. In Mexico, for example, the support given by the Ministry of Education to CONAFE combined with a decentralized management structure allows the state to reach out effectively to very remote areas.

- **Flexibility and demand-responsiveness** are demonstrated in the programs through CONAFE's multilevel teaching approach. Preschool students three to six years old are sharing one classroom. Primary schools apply the same model, instructing children 6–12-year-olds of three different educational levels in one class. These classroom settings present a particular challenge to the young teachers, who work with a curriculum that responds simultaneously to the educational needs of students of three different learning levels. All students work on the same topic, but the students proceed at their own learning pace, responding to their educational level. It was demonstrated that the multigrade classrooms can offer high-quality teaching and a very beneficial learning environment.
- **Integration of health, nutrition, and education services** leads to an ECD approach that fosters the integral development of the child. Participants noted that this integration of services, which requires a high level of cooperation between different community agents, is extremely beneficial to families and facilitates the teaching of relevant life skills from an early age.
- **Suggestions for improvement** included a stronger involvement of fathers and young men in the programs, the integration of adolescent women in the parent education programs, and involvement of parents in literacy programs.

The study tour presented a unique opportunity for information exchange in the framework of South-South collaboration for the improvement of ECD programs and related activities. To capture this experience, a video has been produced documenting the main lessons learned. The video, *Early Childhood Development: The CONAFE Example. Video of the World Bank Study Tour for Francophone African Delegations, Oaxaca, March 2000*, is available in English and French and can be obtained from:

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