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The *IALS Journal* is published once a year and addresses key issues facing today's laboratory and university affiliated schools. Articles offer perspectives on educational trends and include topics such as the history and future of lab schools, innovations in curricula and programs, lab school administration, and teacher education. The journal includes articles grounded in evidence-based classroom practices, action research, and theoretically based quantitative and qualitative scholarship.

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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

We are proud to present the thirteenth volume of the *International Association of Laboratory Schools Journal*, a space devoted to scholarship, research, and innovation in laboratory schools around the world. In this volume, our contributing authors explore a palette of topics that highlight the efforts put forth by our Member Schools towards enhancing teaching practices and improving student learning. The articles included here attest to the lessons that educators have learned in the wake of the pandemic and provide an outlook into the future of teaching, learning, and research in a laboratory school setting.

In “Obligations, Obstacles, and Opportunities: Conducting Research as a Laboratory School Teacher,” Frasier et al. examine the hurdles that laboratory school teachers must surmount in order to fulfill their contractual obligation to conduct research as part of their duties. Although laboratory school teachers feel compelled to partake in their host university’s mission to innovate through research and scholarship, they are often limited by the demands and responsibilities that arise from teaching at the K-12 level. In spite of these challenges, the authors present solutions at the institutional level to alleviate these issues and promote and facilitate research among laboratory school staff members.

Swart et al. set out to investigate the experiences shared by children and their families as they shift from a play-based early childhood center to a more formal school setting. In their article “Exiting the Playroom: Strengths, Struggles and Supports in the Transition to Formal Schooling,” the authors interview a group of parents and alumni who discuss the strengths, struggles, and supports that characterized their transition from preschool to formal schooling. Moreover, their study reflects on the implications for practice that emerge from their interviewee’s insights and sheds light on the ways in which our laboratory schools can facilitate such an important transition in our students’ development.

Sharon Carnahan and Diane Terorde Doyle explore how teachers, administrators, and staff members at the Hume House Child Development & Student Research Center navigated the uncertainty of teaching at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in “Reflections on a Preschool in Quarantine.” Through innovation, research, and collaboration, teachers managed to transform their physical classroom into virtual spaces where preschoolers continued to interact, learn, and develop at a distance. The takeaways that emerge from their experiences at Hume House are invaluable to all educators alike and emphasize the importance of familial support and affective

connections among teachers, families, and students to cope with the uncertainty and the challenges imposed by distance learning.

In “Making Meaning of Parents’ Stories,” Michelle Semple-McBean and Lidon Lashley from the University of Guyana Early Childhood Centre of Excellence (UG-ECCE), report on the results of a survey that was conducted among parents regarding the quality of services provided to the student population at UG-ECCE. Their study highlights the importance of strengthening the relation between school and home in order to gauge the effectiveness of their pedagogical practices and to make the necessary changes to cater to the needs and expectations of stakeholders and the school community at large.

The success of a laboratory school and its mission to model best teaching practices depends on effective communication among all of its components, including the university to which it is affiliated. Nonetheless, when such a lab school is located off-campus and is integrated within a larger independent public school district, there are several communication challenges that the school must conquer to achieve its goals. In the study “The Learning Curve: Leaping into the K-12 Space for a University,” García-Alvarado et al. discuss and reflect on some of these struggles by interviewing teachers and administrators at the Winston Intermediate School of Excellence Scholars (WISE), located in the west side of San Antonio and affiliated with Texas A&M University-San Antonio (A&M-SA). The authors delve into the complexity of day-to-day communication in this context and its impact on the school’s partnership with the university. As part of their reflection, the authors propose that, in the midst of this complexity, “everyone is capable of taking on challenges and pushing beyond their comfort zone” in order to fulfill their school’s mission.

A teacher’s role in most laboratory school settings goes well beyond their teaching duties. In recent decades, educators have been asked to assume leadership roles in order to mitigate the demands placed on school administrators. As teacher leaders, educators undertake many of the responsibilities related to curriculum development and teacher support. In “Perspectives on Teacher Leadership in Cross-Cultural Settings: Case Studies from Teacher Leaders in Multi-Age Schools,” Cozza et al. bring the importance of teacher leaders to the fore and punctuate the significance of cultivating collaboration among peers as a means to optimize the teaching and learning process.

We are privileged to have such a distinguished group of colleagues share their work in this volume of the *IALS Journal*.

We hope that their contributions inspire teachers, researchers, and administrators around the world to strive for excellence in their future endeavors and motivate other authors to submit their research and writing for publication in future editions.

Roberto E. Olmeda Rosario, PhD
2022-2023 Editor

Making Meaning of Parents' Stories: Interpreting Quality at the University of Guyana Early Childhood Centre of Excellence

Michelle Semple-McBean and Lidon Lashley

UNIVERSITY OF GUYANA EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE, UNIVERSITY OF GUYANA

This study reports on a survey that was conducted to gain insights into parents' experiences with the quality of services offered at the University of Guyana Early Childhood Centre of Excellence (UG-ECCE), during the first six months of operations. Before expanding enrolment from 50% capacity, it was necessary to provide a reflective space for parents to share their experiences. Those invited to participate were parents of all (64) children enrolled during the first six months of operations. The classrooms are described as lower classrooms (Infant, Preschool 1, Preschool 2) and upper classrooms (Nursery 1, Nursery 2, Multi Grade). Fifty-one parents from all classrooms participated. Their views were elicited using open-ended questionnaires. The data generated was analysed using a thematic approach. The findings indicated that all parents were satisfied with most, if not all, aspects of services offered, and suggested that the needs of their children were adequately met. Concerns about undesirable areas were also framed by parents to express their interpretation of poor quality. The findings of this report could assist the UG-ECCE or other newly established early childhood settings to better manage, grow, and improve on services.

Keywords: Guyanese; home-school partnership; inclusive early childhood settings; parent satisfaction; quality indicator

Introduction

Brief Background of UG-ECCE

On 5 September 2022 the UG-ECCE commenced operations. The UG-ECCE is a childcare, teaching, and research facility which offers a developmentally appropriate learning environment for children of students and staff of the University of Guyana and from the surrounding communities. The main aim of UG-ECCE is to provide exemplary pedagogical practice and opportunities for research about the impact of early care, education and development, including special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Operations began under a four-phased system: (a) September 2022 to January 2023 operations at 50% capacity of 120

children; (b) September 2022 to June 2023 professional development for teachers; (c) February 2023 to July 2023 operations at 75% capacity; (d) September 2023 to July 2024 operations at 100% capacity. UG-ECCE has two units. Unit One focuses on Early Care, Education and Development. Unit Two focuses on Research, Curriculum Design, Teacher Training, and Professional Development. The establishment of Unit Two is in progress. This report focuses on the operations of the first phase of Unit One. Before expanding enrollment, it was necessary to provide a reflective space for stakeholders to share their experiences about the services offered over the first six months of operations. This article reports on the experiences of parents.

The Children

The UG-ECCE was built to accommodate approximately 120 children. Fifty percent of the children are of staff and students at the University of Guyana. The remaining fifty percent are vulnerable children, drawn from the surrounding underprivileged communities and villages where there is an absence of such whole-day facilities, or parents are not able to afford early care and development services. In other words, UG-ECCE services the university community, and the poor and vulnerable in the surrounding communities, who may not otherwise be exposed to quality care and early stimulation.

The UG-ECCE provides spaces for six groups of children: Infant, Preschool 1, Preschool 2, Nursery 1, Nursery 2, and Multi Grade. Children are enrolled in these groups once they reach the following ages at the start of the September academic year: Infant (3 months), Preschool 1 (1 year, 3 months), Preschool 2 (2 years, 3 months), Nursery 1 (3 years, 3 months), Nursery 2 (4 years, 3 months), and Multi Grade (3 years, 3 months to eight years). Multi Grade offers afternoon care service for children who attend other schools. During the first six months of operations 64 children were enrolled (35 males and 29 females). Of these 64 children, 19 are identified as having special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND) including: exceptional intelligence and giftedness, autism spectrum disorders, speech impairment, learning disabilities or challenges, emotional behaviour disorder, dyslexia, and other developmental delays. The children comprised Amerindians,

East Indians, Africans, and Mixed Races, which reflected the diversity of children in the community and country at large.

Daily operations

Daily operations begin at 7:30 a.m. and end at 5:30 p.m. There is a projection for extended care between 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. for children of the University of Guyana students and staff who study or teach in the evening. In an effort to facilitate learners (age 3 to 8 years) attending other schools in the surrounding communities that end at 12:00 p.m., the Multi Grade class offers after-school care, protection, and early stimulation activities from 12:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Curriculum and Learning Environment

The curriculum caters for all children regardless of diversities, abilities, background, culture, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and impairments. The UG-ECCE aims to be the space that Booths and Ainscow (2011), Lashley (2021, 2022), Levitt (2017), Loreman (2009, 2014), Oliver (2013), and Shakespeare (2014) describe as an environment that evolves to meet the changing needs of children through placing emphasis on their neurodiversities as an enabling rather than disabling factor. In essence, the underpinning principles of the curriculum embrace the theory that learning is social and the basis of constructivism, which considers that individuals gain knowledge by constructing reality through experiences (Yoon, Joung, & Kim, 2012).

The Caribbean Child Development Centre's (CCDC) *Learning Outcomes for Early Childhood Development (ECD) in the Caribbean* (2010), and the Ministry of Education's *Nursery Curriculum* (2022) guide the activities of UG-ECCE. The experiences of children are geared towards meeting the six learning outcomes set out by the CCDC (2010): wellness (healthy, strong, well-adjusted); resilience (coping skills, self-protection); effective communication (verbal, non-verbal, receptive, creative); respect for self, others and the environment (acceptable behavior, relationships); valuing culture (own, others, local, national, international); and intellectual empowerment (critical thinker, independent learner). These outcomes are supported daily in an integrated approach, from the moment the children arrive through to dismissal.

Children start their day with free play time, where they choose activities such as sand and water play, table-top activities, art centre projects, reading materials, blocks, puzzles, shop, dress-up, toys, construction materials, musical instruments, and so forth. Teachers may use this time, if opportunities permit, to question children about their activities to stretch their minds and help children think critically and creatively. For the babies and younger children, teachers engage in daily conversations

and encourage children to respond to their voice, touch, action; follow children's lead to observe the things they are interested in; talk with children about what they are doing, so they link words to actions; draw children's attention to things in the environment; and talk with children about what they do (e.g., their scribbles, attempts to reach for toys).

Group meetings are also an important element of the daily schedule. Here opportunities are provided to teachers and children to share ideas and learn through introduction/reinforcement of new concepts and projects for follow-up in small groups and individual activities. This time also offers opportunities for children to use songs, rhymes, and stories to reinforce their sense of individual well-being and belonging. The activities explored during group meetings usually serve as the foundation of "lesson time" for specific skill building, concept learning, and project development. Children explore and investigate mathematical, language, sciences, civic issues, social studies, technological, and other emerging related areas in smaller groups or individually.

Other important sessions include outdoor play, exploration, book time, television and computer time, and celebrations. Outdoor exploration and play allow children to engage in gross motor activities to help develop mastery in body control. Exploring and wandering the outdoors is celebrated when they build something from available (tires, blocks) and natural (logs, rocks, twigs) materials. The discussions during book, television, and computer time provide a space for children to think about the morals, actions, and messages of the stories and events and provide diverse ways of reinforcing many concepts taught in other sessions. Celebration time is enjoyed and shared by both the home and the UG-ECCE. In addition to festivities in celebration of Guyana's diverse culture, children and teachers reflect on learnings of the day.

Given that the UG-ECCE is situated within the larger university campus, field trips, nature walks, and learning activities outside the centre are common. Visits are made to places such as to the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry's Farm, Creative Arts and Drama Divisions in the Faculty of Education and Humanities, and other spaces around the campus that facilitate discovery and encourage lots of inquiry and discussions. Specialist projects and activities are also led by students and staff of the various Academic Faculties and Units. For example, activities that are science related receive instructional support from the Faculties of Earth and Environmental Sciences, and Natural Sciences.

The final set of experiences surround meals and rest. At UG-ECCE, emphasis is placed on healthy eating and exploring culturally and religiously associated foods. Rest and quiet times are offered throughout the day in the form of sleeping, resting, and solitary play on individual sleeping cots in spaces where

there is an absence of sounds, or spaces where soothing music is played to help children rest and relax.

Through the promotion of these experiences, the learning outcomes set out by the CCDC (2010) are achieved. How well parents perceive the achievement of these outcomes are explored in this paper.

Parents' Opinion Matters

Minimum Service Standard No. 12 of the Caribbean Community's (CARICOM) Regional Guidelines (2008) recommends: "Consultation with parents on their views as to the support the setting should be providing..." (p. 65). UG-ECCE upholds CARICOM's (2008) recommendation along with the principle of parent partnership put forward by the Government of Guyana in Goals No. 8 and 9 of The Guyana Nursery Education Programme (2010): "...establish genuine two-way communication between the home and the school; emphasise teamwork among teachers... parents...". Gillian Pugh and Erica De'Ath, early years home-school activists, explain the process as, "A working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect, and the willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making, and accountability" (Pugh & De'Ath, 1989, p. 68).

These standards, principles and definitions acknowledge that children grow up in a web of institutions –family, neighbourhood, school (Epstein, 2001). Therefore, strides to uphold and raise standards in early care, education, and development for young children will be better achieved if there are good connections in all parts, for what happens in one part affects the others (Davies, 1988). In 2004, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project, a major longitudinal European study of a national sample of over 3,000 children, confirmed the importance of parents' participation. EPPE showed that the most effective ECD settings were those that shared information between parents and staff and involved parents in decision making about children's learning (Sylva et al., 2004). Internationally, regionally, and in Guyana, studies continue to show the importance of offering parents a platform for recognition of their contributions, opinions, and perspectives (see Kaiser et al., 2022; Leo-Rhynie et al., 2009; Meier & Lemmer, 2019). Such platforms allow service providers to address quality matters specific to parents and, by extension, to other ECD stakeholders.

Characteristics of quality in early childhood

The concept of "quality" in early childhood remains complex, constructed and value-laden (Albon, 2011; Dahlberg,

Moss & Pence, 2013; McLean et al., 2022). For the ECD sector in the Caribbean, some boundaries for regional interpretation are set through specific characteristics or indicators identified by CARICOM (2008) and CCDC (2010). The indicators of quality for the Caribbean include, inter alia, programme participation, teacher engagement, management and administration, parent/family partnership, and health and safety. The indicators of quality put forward by CARICOM (2008) and CCDC (2010) are not limited to the Caribbean Regions; they are consistent with international expectations. Examples from Canada, Norway and systematic reviews can be found in Employment and Social Development Canada (2019), Kaiser et al. (2022), and McLean et al. (2022).

As mentioned in the section about the curriculum, and further referenced throughout the text, the indicators set out by CARICOM (2008) and CCDC (2010) steer the services provided. In Guyana, studies have shown how meeting these indicators of quality correlates with positive changes in the developmental trajectories of young children, including those with SEND (see Semple-McBean & Lashley, 2021; Semple-McBean & Rodrigues, 2018). When indicators of quality are adequately met, children's overall developmental possibilities become obvious, enriching all areas of growth –social, physical, intellectual, creative, emotional, and spiritual (SPICES).

The learning and development environments at UG-ECCE are considered appropriate for early shaping of children's SPICES. While remaining culturally relevant, UG-ECCE has structured its operations in keeping with regional and international good practices that have been shown to positively impact children's outcomes. One distinguishing feature is collaborations with the different Academic Programmes and Units at the University of Guyana to offer diverse, robust, and meaningful experiences to uphold these indicators of quality. Research has confirmed that specialist support is an important indicator of quality for parents: "I liked that my child would experience a wide array of experiences from pre-service teachers to content specialists to master teachers all in a single classroom" (Seipel, 2019, p.15). Ultimately, achieving these indicators, could, as Burns (2021, p. 60) puts it, "help children to hone the skills needed to become ideal CARICOM citizens who are capable of living productive lives that benefit them personally, benefit their families as well as their local, regional, and international community."

Research Question

The question addressed was: *How do parents perceive the quality of service offered by UG-ECCE?*

Methodological Considerations

Approach

This research was conducted using the ontological, epistemological, and methodological principles of the Interpretivist Paradigm. Interpretivist researchers are concerned with the meanings and experiences of human beings. The central tenet of the interpretivist paradigm is that people are constantly involved in interpreting their ever-changing world (Harrison et al., 2017). A descriptive parent survey is one platform/approach which allows the parents to share meanings and experiences. The parent survey acted as a tool for (a) empowering parents to contribute to improvements of their children's learning experiences, (b) providing a reflective space for the entire family, and (c) informing future planning and highlighting areas requiring development to assist UG-ECCE in its stride to uphold and raise standards in early childhood, and (d) gathering data for the study. The researchers are aware that the stories of parents are related to their embodied positions and realities in discourses which make them subjectively positioned (Clarke, 2005). The method of story-sharing through the parent survey is considered appropriate for gaining understanding of parents' interpretation of quality because it allows parents to share their realities from their embodied positions in ECD discourses.

Data Source

Parents of all children enrolled during the first six months of operations were invited to participate: Infant (n=11), Preschool 1 (n=14), Preschool 2 (n=13), Nursery 1 (n=11), Nursery 2 (n=12), and Multi Grade (n=3). Of the 64 children, parents reported on 47 of them (73%). A response rate of 48% to 68% is an acceptable norm for surveys of this nature (Holtom et al., 2022). While a high response rate is recorded, the quality value, representativeness, and appropriateness of the data were influenced by the different number of classrooms that participated. Another point to highlight is that even though the report is based on 47 children, four parents submitted separate responses. These parents identified their children's classrooms as Infant, Preschool 1, Preschool 2 and Nursery 2. Therefore, a total of 51 parents participated.

Twelve parents reported on 11 (92%) children from Nursery 2. Infant class received the second highest percentage in terms of response rate—nine parents reported on eight (73%) children. Preschool 1 followed with 11 responses for 10 (71%) children. Smaller response rate was recorded for Preschool 2, which attracted 10 responses for 9 (69%) children. Multigrade and Nursery 1 recorded the lowest percentages of response rate comparative to class size (n=2 or 67%, and n=7 or 64%).

Data Collection and Analysis Protocols

The stories shared by parents are part of a larger survey conducted by UG-ECCE. Decision to incorporate the “telling of parents' stories” within the questionnaire was influenced by the work of Meier and Lemmer (2019) about the importance of using open-ended questions to gain an indication of parent satisfaction with the quality of schooling. The questions that encouraged parents to tell their stories focused on three areas:

- Aspects of service UG-ECCE is performing well at that standout in parents' mind.
- Issues UG-ECCE need to address to improve the quality of service offered.
- Staff members that parents are comfortable, or do not feel comfortable, engaging with.

Two pathways were used to collect data: (a) Google Forms required online submission, and (b) officially stamped hand-delivered questionnaires were returned to a “drop-box” available at the foyer of UG-ECCE. To avoid misrepresentation of the data, and to ensure that the questionnaires were completed by parents of UG-ECCE, email addresses were needed to access the Google questionnaire. Parents were assured that their responses would have been treated with a high degree of confidentiality. Once verified, all email addresses were deleted. The hand-delivered version was especially important for parents with limited access to the internet or suitable electronic devices. This approach was also preferred by parents who did not wish to associate their email addresses with the submission of their questionnaires. The researchers also believed that this completely anonymous approach would have permitted the sharing of more stories about undesirable services. However, the spread of both positive and negative responses cuts across both submission platforms.

Respectively, 42 and 14 parents utilized the options of Google and drop-box questionnaires. Unfortunately, only 37 of the 42 Google submissions were analyzed. Five of the questionnaires submitted online were expunged due to the researchers' inability to verify them as belonging to parents of UG-ECCE. The data collection process spanned four weeks in February to March 2023.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) advice on thematic analysis, analytical insights began early. Given that the researchers inputted the data from the hand-delivered questionnaires onto the Google Forms, three sensitizing categories were created through the patterns, trends, commonalities, and differences observed (teacher-child ratio, variety of activities, and feedback about children's performance). The final themes were generated after each author scrutinised the data twice to eliminate any single author's epistemological predilections, misrepresentation, or

inadequate conceptualization of the themes. Where relevant, stories shared by the parents are placed as extracts to represent the themes generated. Stories that expressed similar ideas are not repeated.

The British Educational Research Association's ethical obligations (2018) were upheld throughout the research process. For example, outstanding practices and underperformance of specific teachers have been recorded, but adherence to ethical standards does not promote identification in reports of this nature. Such specificity is used for individual evaluation and to tailor remedial interventions for staff and programme development at the level of the UG-ECCE. Also, for ethical reasons, disaggregated responses by the classroom are not presented. Instead, relations are established by two attributes: lower classrooms (Infant, Preschool 1, Preschool 2) and upper classrooms (Nursery 1, Nursery 2, Multi Grade). Respectively, findings specific to the lower and upper classrooms are of importance to the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security, and the Ministry of Education, the ministries with responsibilities for the two age groups. Of the 51 parents, 30 (59%) reported on lower classrooms, and 21 (41%) reported on upper classrooms. A copy of the report was shared with parents.

The Stories of Parents

What UG-ECCE is Doing Well

The parents' stories generated five categories about the services they were satisfied with: (a) Learning, developmental, and stimulation activities; (b) Warm, welcoming, and engaging interactions; (c) Professional conduct; (d) Safe adult to child ratios; (e) Maintenance, health, and safety practices. With regard to frequency in pattern of responses, the upper classrooms recorded higher counts in the first two categories. The higher response count for the lower classrooms in the remaining three categories is reflective of the number of parents in this group. As a quick reference, 30 (59%) of the parents are of the lower classrooms. The lower and upper classrooms are represented by LC and UC. The frequencies in which specific categories of stories were shared are listed below, along with samples of extracts.

a. Learning, developmental and stimulation activities (34: LC=16; UC=18)

LC: The social and cultural events are very inclusive and do not require mandatory contribution for participation.

UC: I like the practical manner in which the subjects are taught. I think it is brilliant that they are engaged in baking and cooking....

b. Warm, welcoming, and engaging interactions (28: LC=13; UC=15)

LC: Well to tell you the truth I don't know what goes on with my baby during the day, but I know she's comfortable there.

UC: The teachers, two of the four, demonstrate genuine interest in the development of my child. They always find ways to include him in classroom activities.

c. Professional conduct (25: LC=14; UC=11)

LC: The teachers have a pleasant demeanour ... always greet us with a smile and a warm welcoming tone.

UC: Class teachers share information about my child's learning, development, or achievements, e.g., packing up of toys, drawing, singing.

d. Safe adult to child ratios (21: LC=12; UC=9)

LC: Teacher ratio is great, one and one interaction is on par.

UC: Small class sizes. Multiple class aids to assist the students in need of assistance.

e. Maintenance, health, and safety practices (16: LC=9; UC=7)

LC: Children are provided with opportunities for active play - especially outdoors. This is especially important to me.

UC: A well-maintained environment is set up for children. It is safe, clean and child friendly.

Placing the five categories on a continuum indicates that each parent recorded stories that were associated with at least two. Twenty-seven parents shared stories that were associated with three categories. And from among this group of 27 parents, 11 shared stories that were associated with a fourth category. The story of Parent No. 23 illustrates how four categories were generated from a single parent:

(e) A very clean environment.... (d) The provisions of an adequate number of staff who are (b) sensitive and responsive to children.... (e) Children are provided with opportunities for active play – especially outdoors. This is especially important to me.... (a) There is great respect for diversity and difference, and inclusion of children with special needs. (LC)

While no parent shared stories that cut across all the categories, those shared suggest that the services offered are meeting all the parents' expectations of quality in at least two of the five categories. These stories also indicate that the

services might be sufficiently satisfying the standards set out by CARICOM (2008) for developing children's physical and intellectual capabilities, social relationships, creative skills, and emotional stability.

What UG-ECCE can do Better

Six categories are presented from the stories shared about what UG-ECCE is not doing so well, where there are areas for growth, or why parents might not be completely satisfied. Regarding the lower versus upper classrooms divide, the categories of "additional learning and developmental activities" attracted a higher proportion of stories from the upper classrooms. Also, only the upper classrooms reported on the final category. The higher response count for the lower classrooms in the other categories is reflective of the number of parents in this group. The frequencies in which specific categories of stories were shared are listed below, along with samples of extracts.

a. Additional learning and developmental activities (9: LC=3; UC=6)

LC: What can be improved in my opinion is, more outdoor activities for the children.... I understand children need to pay attention to their classroom activities or work, but children need some kind of outdoor activities once in a while. For example, explore the scenery, the trees, birds, play some games and learn about plants outside etc.

UC: I would like my child to learn to read, spell and write more. My child has the potential and is a fast learner. I feel that she needs more exposure to more learning materials....

b. Inattentiveness of teachers (8: LC=5; UC=3)

LC: There are days when the food I pack returns untouched. I am aware that as stipulated in the handbook the teachers cannot force the children to eat. However, I wonder if another attempt was made or just the first. I know some teachers ensure my child eats even if it is the first instance or another try, but other days the food returns untouched.

UC: Care should be taken when it comes to packing the child's school bag after meals. The bag is usually soiled almost every day when the child returns home.

c. Unsatisfactory teacher-child engagement (8: LC=5; UC=3)

LC: [...] I do feel more training for staff (understanding how to work with SEND children) is necessary....

UC: I am always concerned about my child on [X]days. He is treated improperly most [X]days because of his

special needs. I have observed that on [X]days there is some degree of disregard to his welfare.... Most [X]days I do not allow him to attend school or if he does, I try to collect him as early as I can on [X]days.

d. Unscheduled activities and closures (8: LC=5; UC= 3)

LC: Include in the calendar planned activities for events such as valentine, Mashramani.

UC: Parents and guardians should be notified a week in advance of events such as half-day school, no-school days, and school dismissal within a timeframe shorter than the normal daily stipulated time frame.

e. Inadequate progress report or feedback (5: LC=3; UC=2)

LC: I wish to be informed of current content that my child is doing so that I can repeat with her at home. I shouldn't have to wait until Parent/Teachers conferences to see/hear about the same.

f. Additional SEND support staff (1: LC=0; UC=1)

UC: Some additional assistance should be put in place for the special needs students.

In this section, the stories highlight areas for strengthening and revisiting. These stories suggest that some aspects of services might not be meeting parents' expectations of quality. Placing the six categories on a continuum indicates that 23 of the 51 parents recorded stories that were associated with at least one undesirable area of service. The second, third and fourth categories were generated from stories of the same eight parents. The atypical case leading to the sixth category was not ignored because the same parent shared positive stories about the general adult-child-ratio. The overall findings imply that closer attention might need to be given to elements of services that are hindering standards set out by CARICOM (2008). Stories such as recommendations for promotion of an academic-focused curriculum versus the current play-based, enquiry, and constructivist approach, suggest that some parents are desirous of services outside the scope of UG-ECCE, and beyond the benchmarks identified by the Ministry of Education or set out in the Learning Outcomes for ECD in the Caribbean.

Discussing Lessons Learnt

General Reflections on the Engagement

The indicators of quality identified through the stories suggest that parents' interpretations of quality fall within the confines set out by CARICOM (2008):

- Programme participation: Learning, developmental,

and stimulation activities.

- Teacher engagement: Warm, welcoming, and engaging interactions; Professional conduct; Attentiveness of teachers; Teacher-child engagement; Progress report and feedback
- Management and administration: Professional conduct; Safe adult to child ratios; Scheduling of activities; Progress report and feedback; Staff training; Support for SEND.
- Parent/family partnership: Warm, welcoming, and engaging interactions; Progress report and feedback.
- Health and safety: Safe adult to child ratios; Health and wellbeing practices.

Parents expressed that the overall services provided by the UG-ECCE met the needs of their children inclusive of those with additional needs constituted by impairments and other diversities. It is important for teachers to know this since challenges in catering for this group of children were experienced in the initial startup of the centre. The stories have suggested that the needs of the children are sufficiently met through the diversity in pedagogical approaches embraced at the centre. Some parents recognise the specific components that contribute to their child having a meaningful learning and socialisation experience: “She [teacher parent admired the most] is optimistic and patient when executing her duties, especially when working with the child academically” (UC). Parents who could not identify specific components that contribute to their children’s learning and socialisation experience expressed good quality of service this way: “Well to tell you the truth I don’t know what goes on with my baby during the day, but I know she’s comfortable there” (LC).

The sentiments of the parents above alluded to several pillars upon which the UG-ECCE stands. Teachers are encouraged to see the whole child and embrace their unique strengths and weaknesses. By taking this approach it is likely that every child might be happy because this allows them to feel a sense of belonging. It is noteworthy that the parents think this aspiration is being achieved. Even when parents do not fully understand the approaches, they embrace the approaches because they see the emotional, physical, and cognitive developmental progress in their children.

From the opening of the centre, a daily target was set to ensure each child’s interactions with the staff and facilities are meaningful, enjoyable, and engaging. Teachers are supported to demonstrate the heights of professionalism with patience and a positive attitude and energy. Despite falling short on occasions as noted by the parents’ stories, teachers independently, or with administrative support, correct the behaviour(s) upon which the short fallings are contingent. The reports of parents underpin training needs already prioritised. That is, some

teachers require additional support in terms of professional, pedagogical, and psychosocial training since this was their first experience practicing in an inclusive ECD environment. One lesson the teachers need to take away from these stories is to be open to opportunities to improve their practice. Also, teachers need to be open to constructive criticism as a tool for personal growth and development.

Many teachers received commendations from parents for going the extra mile and making the additional effort to meet their children’s needs. These teachers’ level of professionalism, time management, general deportment, and attitude is admired by parents. Beyond satisfying parents’ expectations, this group of teachers demonstrated the hands-on approach that is enshrined in the code of the UG-ECCE. Such demonstration of patience in challenging situations, especially with the neurodiverse children with additional needs, is commendable and worthy of the recognition given by one parent: “The teacher [teacher parent admired the most] follows and reports my child good days and bad days” (UC).

Specific Areas of Reflection

Diet and Nutrition

The UG-ECCE has a flexible approach to mealtimes. Even though there is a schedule for mealtime, if children indicate that they are not ready physically or emotionally for their meal, they are not force-fed. Children are encouraged and motivated to eat with alternative mealtime arrangements implemented to ensure they do have their nutritional requirements. The teachers have also recognised that through play, children who are picky eaters consume their meals without challenges. Learning that many parents appreciated this strategy is significant in future planning around diet and nutrition at the centre.

There are parents who wish for their children to consume all packed meals. Given the centre’s approach to eating, consumption of all meals is not always possible. Therefore, sensitisation sessions for parents about the centre’s approach might be necessary. The stories from parents about food returning “untouched” on some days suggest that teachers and supervisors may need to be more vigilant, observant, and proactive during mealtime.

Communication and Parental Engagement

Opportunities for parents to engage with the staff on instances of celebrations, issues, occurrences, and concerns seem adequate. And the approachable, friendly, and kind mannerism of teachers seemed to have made communication even better:

The teachers have a pleasant demeanour and are approachable at all times ... always greet us with a smile and a warm welcoming tone. They usually ask questions about our child (not invasive at all) such as how he functions at home and in different situations. They offer to go, what we consider, the extra mile. They offer lots of support. (LC)

The communication avenues that are effective will be further strengthened by continued engagements that allow the staff to listen to the voices of the parents. The home could share good and culturally relevant practices, and the UG-ECCE will improve on sharing researched practices and child engagements. The interest shown by parents towards sharing stories suggests that there might be strengthening of the relationship between the home and school.

Physical Resources

The physical resources are deemed adequate. Their design and allocated amount meet the needs of the diverse group of children. Parents complimented the design and size appropriateness of the furniture used in workstations and classroom activities. The inclusive and neutral colours are celebrated by parents. Children with disabilities are more likely to miss out on school than other children because of the absence of physical resources to cater for their needs. The stories show that UG-ECCE is committed to overcome the barriers and make inclusive education accessible to all children.

Parents expressed that they are pleased with the accessibility. The UG-ECCE's building is accessible to children with physical disabilities. There is a wheelchair ramp with the correct incline to reduce any barrier accessing the building. All the corridors are wide and paved in a wheelchair/ mobility scooter friendly manner. The general infrastructure easily accommodates children of all abilities to get around the school accessing all resources including the disability-friendly washrooms. In the interest of good practice, all children must be visible, and the physical resources ensure their visibility is enhanced.

Engaging Classroom Activities

Parents recognise and appreciate the learning and socialisation approach and process their children are actively involved and engaged in. The project-based, hands-on activities were particularly celebrated by the parents who shared expressions such as: "I like the practical manner in which the subjects are taught. I think it is brilliant that they are engaged in baking and cooking..." (UC).

Activities such as baking and cooking are especially important to encourage the neurodiverse children learn through collaboration with their neurotypical peers. For example, in their cake baking activity children collaboratively discovered how to make eggs foam and why foaming is important to the cake making process. Individually, children test and strengthen their eye-hand and large motor skills required for whipping eggs and stirring of the batter. Activities of this nature have boosted children's curiosity and allowed for engaging classroom interactions.

An important observation is that without the support from the specialized academic departments and units at the university, the practical manner and active exploration the parent alluded to might not have been possible. In baking, gardening, and other scientific activities, age-appropriate language, skills, content, concepts, and materials are provided by the students and staff of the Faculties of Agriculture and Forestry, Earth and Environmental Sciences, and Natural Sciences. These collaborative and combination of approaches allow children and their teachers to be stimulated and be active agents in learning in safe, supportive, and inclusive play-based spaces. Spaces that "allowed instructors and students to *fail forward* with support and guidance" (Seipel, 2019, p.15, emphasis added).

Embracing Diversities

From the planning and implementation stage, UG-ECCE considered what it would take to be an inclusive ECD setting. Parents of children with SEND commend the efforts of teachers in making accommodations and reasonable adjustments. Such adjustments and accommodations are made possible through the disability specialist who advocates for the inclusivity of tested and proven methods by researchers such as Booths and Ainscow (2011), Lashley (2021, 2022), Levitt (2017), Loreman (2009, 2014), Oliver (2013), and Shakespeare (2014).

Observations of practice indicate that before the survey was conducted, staff were learning. It is expected that staff will continue to learn how to change attitudes, views, practices, and philosophical beliefs and become more and more inclusive. The baseline measure is to ensure that all children are pacing towards their individual goals and targets in an inclusive enabling space. With specific reference to SEND, training to improve skills of teachers is ongoing at UG-ECCE. The UG-ECCE is in an advantageous position to offer training in SEND to both teachers and parents since close collaboration exists between the department at the University of Guyana that has responsibility for training in SEND.

Since inclusion is a part of the quality service provided, I do feel more training for staff

(understanding how to work with SEND children) is necessary. Programmes that will specifically target the needs of these children, while maintaining inclusion, is needed. (LC)

Unanticipated Findings

The stories have highlighted some strengths and shortfalls of the parents themselves. Many parents are knowledgeable about the curriculum approaches endorsed by UG-ECCE and appear to be comfortable sharing information to better the services offered. Some shortfalls became apparent from suggestions for changes, additions, or recommendations already in existence at the UG-ECCE and are an active part of children's daily experiences. This suggests that some aspects of awareness and sensitisation might not have had the desired effect of exposing parents to some of the underlying principles, expectations, protocols, and processes. The team at UG-ECCE will be required to continue to raise awareness and conduct (re) sensitisation fora to further expose parents to these principles and practices.

A response rate of 73% suggests that different pathways to completing questionnaires might be an effective way for involving parents in surveys. In the absence of the hand-delivered drop-box method, it is likely that the participation by 14 parents would have been missed. The high number (37) of parents who completed the survey online suggests that they were comfortable with this approach and assured of the level of confidentiality in the processing of the data. Parents were guaranteed that once verified, all email addresses would be deleted from the questionnaires. Finally, it was anticipated that the completely anonymous drop-box responses would have attracted more of the negative stories; however, the responses were balanced across both pathways.

Conclusion

The stories of parents demonstrate the dynamic nature of forging relations between the home and school. The stories portray that even with the best will in the world, parents' expectations and interpretation of "good" quality care, education, and development will not always align with UG-ECCE's. This is not necessarily a bad thing. This is how strong parent/family-teacher/school partnerships are forged. The parents' stories comfortably fit the confinements of partnership defined by Pugh and De'Ath (1989) as relationships that share common purposes, through respectful and negotiated means.

There is strength in the parent's stories. At UG-ECCE, the national goals for early childhood in Guyana are exemplified by the stories of parents. Establishing genuine

two-way communication between the home and the school by permitting parents to tell their stories highlighted areas for strengthening and revisiting. The frequencies in which positive stories were shared outweighed undesirable services. Consistencies in stories were evident across both lower and upper classrooms, and reflective of the number of parents in each group.

While the stories suggest that some parents are desirous of services outside the scope of UG-ECCE, and beyond the benchmarks identified by the Ministry of Education or set out in the Learning Outcomes for ECD in the Caribbean, they have raised awareness of critical issues. For example, developmental programmes to explain new and future expectations are required to sustain continuous training of parents, especially in the areas of play-based pedagogy versus academic-focused learning. With regard to staff and programme development, the stories of parents will allow for tailored remedial interventions. Through teamwork, strategies to effectively address the shortcomings will be possible. Shortcomings for immediate attention include inattentiveness of teachers and unsatisfactory teacher-child engagement.

In a similar view, the respect, acknowledgements, and credits offered through the stories of parents are a source of empowerment for teachers and all staff. Some remarkable stories have been told about learning, developmental and stimulation activities; warm, welcoming, and engaging interactions; professional conduct; safe adult to child ratios; maintenance, and health and safety practices. Outstanding practices of specific teachers have been recorded. Overall, the stories shared by parents suggest that the services offered are sufficiently satisfying parents' expectation of "good" quality for developing children's physical and intellectual capabilities, social relationships, creative skills, and emotional stability. Some stories provide areas to focus on when informing stakeholders about developmentally appropriate expectations and practices for young children. Particularly, the findings of this report could serve to assist UG-ECCE (and others elsewhere that share structures that are similar or comparable) to better manage, grow, and improve on services.

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