

Social inclusion and diversity through ECCE in northeastern Albania

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It is well known that early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes can compensate for disadvantage, regardless of underlying factors such as poverty, gender and ethnicity. In Albania, ECCE happens primarily through state kindergartens, although private enterprises have mushroomed in the past 15 years. While there is no information on the percentage of children entering primary education with pre-school experience, we know that attendance in formal pre-school increases with age. For example, in 2002–03 the enrolment rate by age 3 was 30%, by age 4, 46% and by age 5, 63% (UNESCO 2007). The question is, how can we improve these attendance figures?

We try to answer this question by offering the experience of Partnerë për Fëmijët¹ (“Partners for Children”), an NGO in Albania, in setting up community-based ECCE centres called the Gardens of Mothers and Children Centre (hereafter called the Gardens) in the rural northeast areas of Albania, in the districts of Tropojë, Kukës and Dibër. These areas have the largest proportion of young children in the country, and also deep poverty, poor infrastructure and limited or no ECCE services. The Gardens project started in this area in 2003 with a post-conflict grant from the World Bank through the UNICEF Early Childhood Programme in Albania.

Who are the excluded children?

There are some groups of children particularly at risk of not being able to access any kind of ECCE services:

1. Children whose families are involved in a blood feud, where male members of the family are at risk of being killed. These children are therefore isolated in their homes.
2. Children with disabilities. These children are kept at home because of parental embarrassment related to the disability.
3. Children of Roma or Balkan Egyptian origin. There are no legal restrictions on these children having access to ECCE, but they are sometimes excluded on the excuse that the quota for a certain ECCE facility has been reached and they cannot be accommodated.
4. Children who are being raised by their grandparents because their parents have divorced. (By customary law, when parents divorce children live with the paternal lineage and mothers are not allowed to see their children again.) In these cases, concern over the added expense of raising the child may be greater than concern over giving the child social and educational opportunities.
5. Children whose parent, usually a father, has migrated and children who have lost one or both parents. By tradition, mothers are not allowed to leave their homes and socialise in the community, and therefore children being primarily cared for by mothers have difficulty accessing ECCE facilities.

Strategies to bring excluded children into the Gardens

Respecting the local culture

The northeast had not previously received much attention from international donors or the NGO community. The process of setting up the Gardens involved assessing the villages and communes; holding open meetings for communities, local government representatives, teachers, elders and families to explain ECCE and the aims of setting up the centres; and returning to see if a community wanted to work together to set up a Garden. As a

community-based centre it was essential that the elderly and respected in the village supported the Garden. An administrative mother was selected to manage the Garden and its activities. Criteria for selection were that she was well respected in the community, chosen by the community members and elder, motivated and suitable to work with young children and that she had adequate space in her home to set up the Garden. In many of the centres community members provided their labour and commitment to the centre by cleaning, redecorating and providing pieces of equipment for the use and enjoyment of the children.

Bringing mothers, grandmothers and young women to the Gardens

The administrative mothers, lead advocacy mothers and the mothers of children attending the Gardens are the best publicity and advocates for raising the profile of the centres with isolated mothers and children. The choice of administrative mother and her home for the Garden is crucial in enabling many mothers and their children to come to the centre. The centre needs to be accessible and acceptable to the families who use the Garden. Administrative and lead mothers visited the homes of isolated children and families and explained the activities that were provided in the Garden. Mothers were invited to come to the centres with their children, their husbands and grandparents. Once the elder generation and the men saw the types of activities in which their children and women would take part, their fear and concerns were reduced and slowly the numbers of isolated children attending increased.

Making the Gardens a safe haven for all children

The Gardens are open to all children aged between 3 and the mandatory school age of 6 years. In some cases, where a child is assessed as not ready for mandatory schooling (due to intellectual or physical impairment), the child can remain for a further year in the Garden to enhance his/her skills and confidence. Children and their mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers and elder sisters are encouraged to attend the Garden five mornings a week. The Gardens have introduced a new way of thinking. Children are no longer expected to sit quietly behind desks for hours and be taught by rote, but to learn through experiential activities, for example using water, sand, natural resources from

the countryside in which they live, painting, drawing and team games. Reading, writing and mathematics are taught as part of the daily activities. Children themselves pressure their parents and grandparents to bring them to the Gardens and are sometimes unhappy at weekends when the centres are closed. Children whose families are affected by blood feuds are helped to attend by administrative mothers, who accompany them and female family members to and from their homes. Counselling and advice on how to address the children's fears and anxieties is also provided.

Fathers are also important

Initially three district Boards of Fathers were set up in Dibër, Kukës and Tropojë, and each Garden then developed its own Board of Fathers. The programme reinstated the tradition of the *oda e burrave* (men's meeting room), where men gather together to take decisions on issues that concern the community. This also gives them the opportunity to talk about issues related to ECCE and the role of fathers. Board members were trained on child rights, stages of child development, non-physical forms of discipline, the importance of fathers to young children, conflict resolution and mediation. Members of the Boards of Fathers visited families involved in blood feuds and mediated between them to ensure the safety of the children. They also worked with the in-laws when the father of the child was deceased to allow the mother to take the child to the centre.

What unites us is greater than what separates us

The activities in the Gardens are based around play. Administrative and lead mothers were trained by staff of Partnerë për Fëmijët to use play as a learning experience. Further advice and training was provided by senior specialists of NIPPA, the largest early years organisation in Northern Ireland. (NIPPA and its specialists have developed their practice and worked through 30 years of conflict and sectarian violence, so are experienced in addressing diversity.) Children with different abilities and skills or from families involved in blood feuds and other social situations all play together. When children fight over the same toy or want to do the same activity, the administrative mothers speak with the children to teach them to share. Children unable to attend the Garden can still benefit, as the administrative or lead mother visits isolated children and mothers in their

homes. These isolated mothers are taught how to develop their child's skills and abilities.

Individual work

Although the activities have an emphasis on non-directional play, individual work is undertaken with each child. One often hears parents explain how their child has changed and developed: "My child says 'thank you' and 'please' more often now", "He can count" or "She can write her name". Nevertheless, they still ask for a more formalised means of demonstrating their new skills. We began with training from NIPPA in observing individual children and how to document their observations. This has been extended to assessing each child in their physical, intellectual, social, behavioural and psychological development, and developing individual action plans for each child. These action plans concentrate on the areas that the child needs to improve, and plan the activities that will meet the child's needs within the wider context of the Garden's daily activities. The administrative mother provides the child's parents or carers with a report on what the child can do well and what needs attention. Parents are asked to assist in this development by doing activities with their child in the home.

Health information

As well as education, children and mothers (both at the Gardens and those isolated in their homes) also receive health information and monthly check-ups from a paediatrician and a gynaecologist. In an isolated community these health consultations provide crucial information on respiratory illnesses, diarrhoea, waterborne diseases and infectious disease and their treatment, which is not otherwise readily available. Additionally, children and mothers who are ill can be swiftly referred to health services that usually they would not contact.

The main challenges

The mentality that a child with disabilities is a challenge

In Albania there are no laws or policies about the integration of children with disabilities, and there is limited integration of children with any form of disability into mainstream education. There is also little or no provision of rehabilitation or support services to families with a disabled child.



Making the Gardens a safe haven for all children is a strategy to bring the excluded into the programme

Many parents and communities believe that the presence of a disabled child in the group or class will negatively influence the already poorly resourced education, and that the behaviour of their own children may deteriorate. Parents and families with disabled children feel embarrassed about the child's situation, and are concerned that the child will be ridiculed and therefore will be caused anxiety.

Attitudes to NGOs

NGOs in Albania are not always welcomed because it is assumed that they operate only to get money. Parents and communities often believe that NGOs are more concerned with building their reputation with a donor than with addressing a pressing issue for the community. Some parents thought that in bringing their children to the Garden, they were doing *Partnerë për Fëmijët* a favour. There is also the belief that the State should provide services related to education or health, and that NGO projects have limited stability.

Women's work overload

Women overburdened with agricultural and household work do not have much time to take their children to the Garden, interact with the administrative mothers or support the daily activities of the Gardens by helping as a volunteer.

Lack of specialised help

There are no specialised services within the local communities or regional cities for children who have experienced traumatic situations within their families. Although administrative mothers are trained and given information on how to work and interact with isolated children, the

services of psychologists to help rehabilitate and support traumatised children and to advocate for their inclusion into society and educational establishments are needed.

The way forward

Despite the challenges, the 28 Gardens continue to be an essential part of their communities. Although core operational funding from a donor has ceased for most of the centres, the parents, communities, local government and/or regional Directorates of Education have stepped in to contribute to their regular functioning. This confirms that the Gardens were not just a project to satisfy a donor, but provided for a real need in the communities. Marginalised children continue to attend the Gardens and many have shown marked achievements. For example, Mira could not speak two years ago but has now learned to communicate. Her parents believed that her delayed speaking was associated with mental disabilities and had given up on her. Agim experienced the trauma of seeing his grandfather killed in his own home, but now actively socialises with other children. Linda has Down Syndrome, but she uses her toy telephone to 'reach' her migrant father and 'talk' to him.

Recognising its success, the National Strategy of Early Childhood Education for Albania has recommended the Gardens as an alternative programme for communities where state ECCE service is limited or not available. At the request of the local government and communities in three areas, Partnerë për Fëmijët, supported also by the Early Childhood Programme of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Albania, has entered into new partnerships set up new centres and train more local staff. But more work needs to be done, especially to help educators increase their access to information, so they can update their knowledge and skills.

Note

- 1 Partnerë për Fëmijët is the successor organisation to the Christian Children's Fund Albania which started work in Albania in 1999. The organisation is well noted for its community-based early childhood development

programme implemented in northeastern Albania that won it a 2004 Best Practice Award from the MedChild Institute. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of other staff members of Partnerë për Fëmijët: Sanie Batku, Ermira Kurti and Ermonela Myrtezani, to this article.

Reference

UNESCO (2007). The Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007. Strong foundations: Early childhood care and education. Paris, France: UNESCO.