

CHAPTER 4

PROMOTING CAPACITY IN ECD: FROM COMMUNITIES TO COUNTRIES

Early in its development the FNPP's dialogic generative curriculum model attracted the attention of individuals and institutions in Canada and internationally who were looking for alternatives to top-down, externally-driven approaches to education and to ECD in particular. The development of the FNPP fit well, as a case study, into the context of a 'Summer Institutes' program that Pence had launched in the 1980s at the University of Victoria (UVic) to explore innovative approaches to early childhood issues at local, national, and international levels. The Summer Institutes proved to be a good testing ground for some ideas that would later appear in a 1994 volume edited by Moss and Pence, *Valuing Quality in Early Childhood Services: New Approaches to Defining Quality*, whose philosophical descendent is a well-received book by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence first published in 1999: *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care* (now in its 3rd 'classics' edition and translated into 12 languages). Those volumes provided critical lenses to view what have become hegemonic and limiting forces in early childhood education, care and development, and helped to identify alternative ways forward.

In 1994, the UVic's School of Child and Youth Care and the BC Office of the Children's Ombudsman co-hosted a major international conference in recognition of the International Year of the Family and of progress towards ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The conference, *Stronger Children, Stronger Families*, featured a number of content streams, one of which was ECD. Pence, the organizer of the ECD stream, invited a number of UNICEF headquarters and country office staff to present at the conference. The conference itself overlapped with one of the UVic Summer

Institutes, so the UNICEF presenters were able to participate in both the Institute and the conference.

At the end of his stay in Victoria, Cyril Dalais, Senior Educational Program Officer at UNICEF headquarters, asked Pence to work with his office to develop an international, intensive seminar series, organized along the same interactive, participatory lines as the Summer Institutes. This invitation launched a very different path for generative work—one that ultimately led to sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and the development of diverse, complementary initiatives to advance ECD in SSA.

The Early Childhood Education, Care and Development Seminar Series

The first step on this new generative path was an ECD International Seminar/Institute in the summer of 1995 at the University of Victoria. Interest in the seminar was strong, with participation from many regions of the majority world. Participants were pleased with the seminar and made three requests to UNICEF. First, they suggested that UNICEF should continue to support international ECD Seminars through the University of Victoria. The second request was to supplement the international ECD seminars with regional ECD seminars focused on enhancing capacity in specific regions (for example, Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa). Lastly, participants voiced their support for the development of a distance education graduate degree program in ECD to help meet the pressing need for high-level studies to support the well-being of children, families, and communities in the majority world. The UVic's School of Child and Youth Care was seen as uniquely well qualified to develop such an innovative graduate program, given Pence's experience in developing the FNPP and delivering the Summer Institutes and international ECD seminar series.

UNICEF responded by providing seed money for Pence to plan a regional ECD seminar/institute on sub-Saharan Africa, to be hosted at the University of Namibia, then seat of the Early Childhood Development Network in Africa (ECDNA) under the coordination of Professor Barnabas Otaala⁴. The three-week seminar took place in September/October 1997 and attracted 26 accomplished professionals from 11 primarily Eastern and Southern African countries. The design of this first regional ECD Seminar was inspired primarily by the earlier Summer Institutes and by lessons learned from the FNPP. The lead presenters

⁴ *The original request from UNICEF was not limited to Africa—SE Asia and the Pacific was also identified as a priority and Pence worked with UNICEF to develop and deliver an ECD Workshop for that region as well in 1997.*

included African and non-African international leaders, but the seminar was planned with a keen awareness that the participants themselves brought a wealth of knowledge and experience—most were mid- to senior-level professionals within key government ministries or NGOs in their respective countries. That local, country-level knowledge was deemed just as critical as the SSA and international sources. Thus, the seminar was structured to allow a good amount of small group activity and reporting back to the plenary for broader discussion. The seminar also purposefully opened up to possibilities beyond what were deemed ‘best practices’ in the West. Participants were encouraged to be very familiar with such models and discourses, but to consider them from multiple perspectives and to reflect on them from their own bases of experience, generating their own ‘good ideas’ and ‘good practices’ and sharing them with their colleagues from other countries.

We later learned from seminar participants that this emphasis on local knowledges and the purposeful exchange of South-South SSA perspectives was rarely featured in events organized by donors and international organizations. Instead, such events typically employed North-South knowledge transfer activities (an approach all-too-familiar to this day). The result, readily apparent in SSA as one visited countries, was far greater familiarity with ideas, approaches, and programs from the North than with ideas and programs underway in SSA—even from neighbors just across the border. Such dynamics were reminiscent of comments from various SSA colleagues who received their basic education in-country and at the end of that education could draw the rivers of Europe on a map, but not the rivers of Africa.

Throughout the seminar, it was also considered important for participants to engage informally with one another and the lead presenters with shared meals, entertainment evenings, and a field trip on the Sunday ‘day off’—all welcome breaks from the intense work of the seminar, which started early and ran late. Gradually, it became apparent that these times for personal and informal connections served as an important ‘glue’ for the evolving ‘community of care and practice’—a multi-organizational, multi-country ECD community that had not existed on such a scale before. Largely through the depth of this evolving community, new possibilities for ECD in SSA emerged. Shared ideas slowly evolved into realities, despite the profoundly challenging contextual conditions that characterize much of the SSA environment.

Following the successful seminar in Namibia, The Gambia Ministry of Education requested a similar seminar for their sub-region. In November 1998, the Ministry and The Gambia UNICEF office hosted a two-week ECD seminar

with 28 participants from 12 primarily West and Central African countries. The general structure and organization of the second seminar was similar to the first, though the presence of both Anglophone and Francophone participants posed challenges not experienced in Namibia (for example, simultaneous translation). The critically important informal activities tended to take place along language lines, which had not been the case in Namibia a year earlier.

Despite the language challenges during the second seminar, collectively, the first two African ECD Seminars were highly effective in identifying country-level ECD leaders, highlighting worthwhile but little-known ECD initiatives, and forging the personal and professional bases for enhanced networking and information-sharing across SSA. When the World Bank expressed interest in hosting a third ECD Seminar in Uganda, discussions rapidly moved to thoughts of expansion: hosting Africa's first International ECD Conference. In hindsight, the step to a continent-wide conference seems fated and natural, but at the time it felt risky—perhaps a step too soon for such a fledgling 'community.' But with tremendous support from the World Bank and numerous international and United Nations organizations active in ECD in SSA, the conference went from idea to reality in less than nine months—and with it, a key piece for the evolving puzzle of ECD capacity promotion in SSA was brought on board.

The World Bank's support of the conference extended beyond the costs of the venture. Somewhat surprisingly, the Bank also gave its support to highlight local initiatives and to use a strengths-based theme, as captured in the conference's subtitle, *Showcasing ECD Innovation and Application in Africa*. Highlighting innovation and success in Africa was an unusual focus for the time, and unfortunately remains so today, as funders (typically based in the North) seem to almost unconsciously revert to the North for their exemplars and keynotes, showcasing the West and perpetuating a colonial dynamic.

Registration requests for the conference soon far exceeded the 200-seat capacity of the conference centre. That demand, plus the spirit of the interactions, underscored the need for Africa's voice to be heard in the international ECD arena. Conference participants were enthusiastic in their evaluations, recommending similar Africa-focused conferences in the future (see "The African ECD Conference Series" below).

With the conclusion of the Uganda Conference, the five-year ECD Seminars initiative (1994-1999) was well placed to explore another facet of its evolution: creation of the ECD 'university without walls' (ECDVU) vision first identified earlier in the decade (ECDVU, 2000). Ideally, sufficient international funds would have been available not only to launch the ECDVU, but also to sustain the new

conference series and continue the ECD seminars, perhaps with an increasing focus on Francophone and Lusophone Africa. Such a tri-part undertaking was called for early in the 2000s (Pence et. al., 2008), but in 1999 limited funds and related resources forced a choice and the ECD seminars were discontinued.⁵

The African ECD Conference Series (1999-2009)

The African ECD conference series, which spanned the decade from 1999 to 2009, emerged from the ECD seminars, but over time came to address additional critical facets of capacity promotion in African ECD. Much larger than the seminars (conference registration ranged from 200 in 1999 to over 600 in 2009, compared to 25-30 for the seminars), and much shorter (3-5 days versus 14-20 for the seminars), the conferences provided a useful opportunity to take a large-scale ‘snapshot’ of ECD in Africa, to showcase African programs and people, to share work and ideas with colleagues from many other African countries, and, increasingly, to involve political leaders from across SSA. In addition, the conferences provided an important venue for broad scale advocacy. Following the 2002 conference in Eritrea, local and SSA conference organizers released the *Asmara Declaration on Early Child Development: Framework for Action* (2002). After the 2005 conference in Ghana, the *Accra Communiqué* (2005) was produced. This document was endorsed by more than 25 ministers or ministerial representatives who attended the Accra conference, and subsequently helped to inform the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) biennial, which took place in March 2006. In the wake of the 2009 conference, hosted in Senegal, participants and leaders released *A Call to Action*, which the President of Senegal took forward to the African Union.

Starting with the first African ECD Conference in Uganda, the series was primarily focused on SSA and on reaching African ECD professional and governmental leaders. However, starting with Accra in 2005, that focus expanded to include African political leaders as well, creating a second stream within the body of the conference. Many international conferences privilege speakers

⁵ *It is interesting to note that in the 2010s the calls for promoting leadership at diverse levels for ECD in SSA are once again loud. And it is also of interest to note that typically the approach taken by the North is that of North-South knowledge transfer—this despite an evidence base in support of a generative South-South (but not excluding the North) knowledge exchange model. Gaining funding for such South-South focused exchanges remains as difficult in the 2010s as it was in the 1990s—a testimony to the hegemony of knowledge in service to power. Restoring a sense of ‘corporate memory’ to ECD in SSA, a process of ‘looking back,’ should be considered along with other facets of ‘moving forward’ discussed in the concluding chapter.*

from the West (for example, as keynotes) above regional and local presenters, conveying a not-so-subtle message that ‘good and best’ reside in the West. As part of promoting capacity, it is critical that Africa appreciate its own ingenuity, leadership, and existing capacity. At the African ECD conferences, more than 75% of presenters, and all but one of the keynote speakers have been from Africa. Table 4.1 on the following page illustrates how the conference series fostered the growth of ECD capacity in Africa over a very short period.

Table 4.1 Location, Size, and Scope of African ECD Conferences

Conference Location & Theme	Date	# of Attendees	# of SSA Countries	# of Presenters	African based participation	African Government Representation
Kampala, Uganda Showcasing ECCD: <i>Innovation and Application in Africa</i>	1999	200	19	35	75%	3 national ministers
Asmara, Eritrea <i>Health, Nutrition, Early Childhood Care and Education, and Children in Need of Special Protection</i>	2002	200	28	60	80%	6 national ministers and 1 international minister
Accra, Ghana <i>Moving Early Childhood Forward in Africa</i>	2005	300	39	80	85%	6 national ministers and 27 international ministers or reps
Dakar, Senegal <i>From Policy to Action: Expanding Investment in ECD for Sustainable Development</i>	2009	600	42	146	89%	35 national ministers and 113 international ministers or reps

At the conclusion of the first African International Conference on ECD in 1999, Marito Garcia, lead economist at the World Bank for SSA, announced that the World Bank would be providing support to develop the ECDVU program through funds from the Norwegian Educational Trust Fund. The ECDVU program and its development will be discussed in the following section.

The Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU) (2000-present)

Interest in developing a distance-based, graduate ECD program was first sparked at the 1994 and 1995 Summer Institutes held at UVic, with support continuing to build at the ECD seminars held in Namibia (1997) and The Gambia (1998). Garcia's announcement at the 1999 conference was a key next step for capacity promotion in SSA—one focused on country-level, ECD development through the identification and support of key country-identified individuals who could advance policies, programs, and training. These individuals, working in teams in communities of practice, were envisioned as 'impact-multipliers,' who could create the kinds of synergistic ripples that had made a difference for communities like Meadow Lake, but which would now be possible for entire *countries* in Africa.

By 1999, the general philosophy and structure for developing the ECDVU were reasonably clear, based on experiences from the FNPP, the Summer Institutes, the ECD seminars, and the inaugural SSA conference. Unlike many projects arising from Western institutions, this one was committed to a post-colonial approach that was built on identifying Indigenous strengths, based on over a decade of experience. The importance of respecting multiple knowledges and fostering ways for those knowledges to inform one another and generate new possibilities was also understood and had withstood rigorous evaluation from both Indigenous and academic perspectives. The ECDVU proposal had also benefitted from informal discussions that had taken place in the latter half of the 1990s involving Cyril Dalais and Barnabas Otaala, focusing on operational issues in the SSA context. Separate discussions with Michael Gibbons (then with the Banyan Tree Foundation) explored how a post-colonial philosophical approach could inform capacity and leadership promotion in SSA. Gibbons' ideas resonated with Pence's own work with Dahlberg and Moss, which sought to move beyond current hegemonic practices in early childhood services and open up to sources of knowledge beyond dominant discourses (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999).

These various informal discussions throughout the late 1990s were supplemented by a decision to identify an international advisory group that would meet and review an operational plan for the program once funding was in place. That advisory meeting took place early in 2000 and produced greater clarity in numerous areas, including: overall participant numbers (28-30); participant numbers from specific countries (3-4 person teams); priority countries (relatively stable countries most in need of capacity promotion); the participant selection processes (to be led in-country); and key failings and successes with earlier ECD initiatives in SSA. The international advisory group was supplemented with an African-based group and a technology advisory group, with all three making substantial contributions, particularly over the inaugural period.

New elements beyond those used in the FNPP, the seminars, and the conference were required for the ECDVU to create a “*virtual* family of committed learners and actors” located across sub-Saharan Africa from an institutional base at the University of Victoria. The only way to meet this challenge at a reasonable cost while allowing participants to continue their employment was to incorporate use of the Internet—and that strategy, plus continuation of two-week face-to-face seminars, were core structures envisioned in the ECDVU plan. However, this vision was based on certain assumptions regarding the state of technology in Africa at that time.

In 2000, a technology feasibility study was conducted (ECDVU, 2000), yielding a cautious “yes, it [internet connectivity] should be feasible—most of the time.” But there were other caveats: for maximum connectivity it would be better if participants were located in, or could access, larger urban centres; bandwidths were limited and courses needed to avoid high bandwidth features (no streaming video, for example); the program needed to be purposefully ‘redundant,’ providing students with discs and print materials as well as the web base; and it was recommended that the developers create a special educational support position, a “cohort manager” who would provide ongoing support for and connection among learners, instructors, technical support, and the central ECDVU office.

Around this same time, the curriculum was designed, building on the generative curriculum principles of respect for multiple sources of knowledge, including the importance of local content and context, as well as the need for a program that would mesh smoothly across a combination of six months of web delivery with a mid-point, two-week, face-to-face seminar. The curriculum, in all ways possible, had to advance the three main objectives of the program for ECD in SSA: leadership development, capacity-promotion, and network enhancement. Assignments within and across courses, discussion sessions, use

of local learning teams, personal support messages, inclusion of local leaders at seminars, and all other aspects of the program were designed to address these three central objectives (chapter 5 describes in more detail the curriculum and other features of the ECDVU program).

While curriculum development work began to move forward, it was also necessary to create a system to identify participants for the new program. All indications were that the program would generate strong interest across Africa, requiring the development of a process to select countries and students. The international advisory group helped to identify priority countries (primarily those committed to ECD but capacity-limited and politically stable). The group also helped develop procedures and criteria that could be used in-country to recruit and then select participants. The selection process that evolved linked back to the earlier African seminars, using network participants from the seminars and the conference, in coordination with UNICEF, NGO, and government staff, to create an 'ECD Intersectoral and Multi-organizational Country Committee' composed of key ECD groups and individuals from each country. The Country Committee was charged with three tasks: (1) to create an 'ECD Goals and Objectives' statement spanning a 5-7 year period; (2) to advertise the ECDVU program, identify the criteria for selecting country nominees, and solicit applications; and (3) to nominate up to four people from different sectors and organizations to take part in the program. Applicants were required to discuss with their employer their interest in ECDVU and to seek some level of employer financial support (typically travel and/or accommodation and meals for participation in the seminars). The program was free for students, with all program delivery costs covered by various 'core' donors. For the first delivery, these included: UNICEF at headquarters and at some country levels, the World Bank at country levels (for some participants), UNESCO headquarters, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and CIDA. In addition, approximately 60 per cent of local employers were able to contribute some support to their participating employee, particularly for attendance at the face-to-face seminars.

In late August 2001, program delivery started. As the program moved forward, a great deal of data was collected. For example, within the curriculum itself, Country Reports on the Status of Children and Women was a first-term country team assignment, and various other assignments supported in-country initiatives. Evaluations of courses, instructors, support services and seminars were ongoing, while broader assessments of the overall program effectiveness were collected every six months and evidence of capacity promotion within each country was documented. Every six months, the two-week, face-to-face seminars rotated to a different part of Africa (Southern, Eastern, and Western)

and in each location, regional ECD specialists joined the international faculty for presentations and discussions. Site visits to key programs were made in conjunction with each seminar and a wide variety of academic and ‘community-bonding’ activities took place. The pattern of courses, seminars, and collection of materials rotated through the six-month terms for the first two years of the program, with the final year focused on developing and completing a thesis or major project.

Concurrent with this three-year program, in 2001 the World Bank’s Middle East-North Africa (MENA) section requested delivery of a one-year professional development program based on the ECDVU model. With funds from the Dutch government, the ECDVU developed the MENA program in 2002 and delivered it in 2003. Subsequently, a second MENA and three SSA programs, all one year in duration, were delivered, the most recent in 2010-2011. Funding support for the three one-year SSA deliveries have come from: in-country employers, World Bank country funds, UNICEF country offices, the Open Society Foundation-UK, and the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

As one might anticipate, the ECDVU organizers learned as much about supporting ECD capacity promotion as the students. A key lesson in this rich learning was the importance of forging a close-knit community—one where the power of shared commitment to a transcendent ‘good’ with the potential to enhance the well-being of Africa’s children overrides the myriad challenges these leaders and learners faced every day. That commitment permeated every facet of the ECDVU and deeply impacted its ability to deliver ‘on the ground’ results (see chapter 6).

It has always been implicit in the capacity-promoting philosophy of the ECDVU that the program would eventually be led and delivered by African scholars in African universities, with initial support from the University of Victoria during the transition. That long-standing objective is now on the threshold of being met: In 2013/2014, the University of Ibadan received approvals to offer, in collaboration with the University of Victoria, their own online Graduate Diploma program. The inaugural delivery at the University of Ibadan is taking place in 2015/2016. The ECDVU looks forward to many years of African universities’ leadership in support of ECD capacity, an institutional transfer and support model employed earlier with the FNPP.

Above, we have provided an overview of the ECDVU and its origins through the Summer Institutes, the African ECD seminars, and the African ECD conferences. In chapter 5, we provide a greater level of detail regarding the program and its operationalization, while in chapter 6, we provide details from the programs’

external evaluations. Perhaps, in reviewing this story, ‘pieces of a puzzle’—a metaphor introduced earlier in this chapter—is a useful way to understand how the SSA initiatives developed, and how other capacity-promoting initiatives can and do arise. The approach that generated the ECDVU and all the other ECD initiatives described in this volume has been governed as much by opportunity as plan. This perspective is too often unappreciated by those governed by a logical-sequential approach to the world—an approach that has at times denied ECD the springboard of serendipity. What is too seldom understood by those with such mentalities—but what is understood more often at the grassroots—is that serendipity and opportunity are as critical for development as the pre-establishment of goals, objectives, and measurable outcomes—indeed, probably more so. It is the combination of plan and opportunity that makes for successful advances. The unexpected support of the World Bank to move onto a ‘next phase’ before the cement had set on the first phase—the seminars—was an opportunity not to be missed. And that lesson is important for all of those committed to building ECD in SSA: The opportunities that arise are different in each country and the pattern for development will quite naturally be different as well. In some cases policy development precedes exceptional programs, in others it is the reverse, while another has an exceptional approach to education and training that is spawning new and exciting initiatives. And always there is the unexpected feature of idiosyncratic brilliance, lighting unimagined pathways. All of these are parts of the puzzle—all are needed to advance the process of building ECD successfully across diverse contexts.

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