

Mississippi, USA

After-school – a model for effective transition

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Every child has the right to grow, learn and thrive in an environment that is safe, nurturing and stimulating. For poor American children such opportunities are limited; despite America's affluence, poverty continues to exist in many of its communities, both rural and urban. America's overall poverty rate² is 12.5 percent; and at 17 percent, the fastest growing poverty group is children³. With 17.9 percent of the state's population living in poverty, Mississippi is the third poorest state in America, and the Delta is Mississippi's poorest region.

African-American children in the Mississippi Delta are growing up in a dichotomised society, and in an environment that is inextricably linked to race – ethnically the Delta is 70 percent African American, and over one-third of African-American children under 18 years old grow up in poverty.

Aside from the abundant human capital in the Mississippi Delta, there are major gaps in available resources for the community. Resources that are found in most American communities such as libraries, boys and girls clubs, swimming pools and other activities, are generally absent. The geographical dispersion of people in some of these communities makes it difficult to access services. Also, many parents are not at home during the day as they have to travel long distances to work, so it's common to see children playing in the streets unsupervised.

Transition to kindergarten at the age of 5 – elementary school starts a year later – will usually be a child's first interaction with formal education. For both children and parents this presents a challenge of learning a new culture, the culture of formal

education. They need to build relationships with a new set of individuals of a kind that they haven't dealt with before, in an environment that's more structured than they're used to.

First-time parents in the Delta may not have developed an appreciation of the importance of reading to their children, or of developing relationships with their children's teachers. Literacy and vocabulary are an issue for many children making the transition to school, particularly in lower-wealth communities. The language children are expected to use in schools may be more formal than the language they're used to speaking in the home.

The Mississippi Delta Children's Partnership

The Mississippi Delta Children's Partnership (MDCP) is a community-based programme focused on children and families. The Partnership consists of five nonprofit organisations which serve a total of 17 socially and geographically isolated communities in five Delta counties. The concept of 'partnership' is central to what we do – building a reciprocal partnership between schools, parents and communities. This partnership seeks to nurture excellence and affirm parents. It is a process that helps the child and parent feel comfortable and build relationships with new environments, to feel that they're valued, that they have a perspective that's appreciated, that there is an acknowledgement and recognition of the culture that they bring into that relationship.

Each site has an independently designed child-focused programme that emphasises language development, academic performance, social and cognitive development and self and ethnic



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group efficacy. These after-school/summer school programmes are called 'Children's Villages.' Families are a significant component of the Partnership and are engaged through 'Family Circles.' In our Family Circle meetings, we aim to build the self-esteem of parents by affirming and empowering them, first as individuals and then as parents.

One may ask why use a after-school/summer school programme for transition purposes? First and foremost, transition is a process, not an exit-entry event. After-school provides critical *extended* support for successful school transition. The programme helps students *establish and maintain* a strong early educational foundation. The selection of an out-of-school-time model which emphasises reading and mathematics is particularly well suited for poor and African-American students. These students consistently achieve below the national average in these two disciplines and the gap widens as they continue in school⁴. Consequently, early

intervention in the form of on-going educational enrichment helps these children make the initial transition as well as provides support for continued success.

Quality after-school must provide curricula continuity between regular school and the programme through assessment, feedback and evaluation of the child's progress and needs. The content focus is on reading, language and mathematics skills. It is designed as an individualised instruction system which meets the needs of mixed-ability children. This allows the after-school to provide real-time assistance in areas where children are experiencing difficulty. It also enables the programme staff to share concrete objective feedback with school teachers and parents.

Quality summer/after-school programmes provide a safe and nurturing environment that motivate, inspire, and support age-appropriate development in settings

outside the traditional classroom. This is critical for children in the Delta because of the general absence of any child-focused facilities and activities.

Lastly, linkages and collaboration with public schools and communities are essential dimensions of a quality summer/after-school programme. These are strengths of the Children's Villages. Facilities and resources are shared. One Village is physically located in a school building. This collaborative arrangement has several advantages. It is convenient for children, parents and teachers. It allows for easy exchange of information between the regular school and after-school staff. Further, the children use public school transportation and retired school teachers are recruited to work in the summer/after-school programme.

Appreciative enquiry

The 'appreciative enquiry' tool we use involves focusing attention on what an individual can do, not what they can't. We engage parents in a storytelling model, where they talk about their peak experiences. For example, we ask them to recall times when they, as a child, had an experience with their parents that made them feel good. And times when, as a parent, they did something with their child that made them feel good. The theory is that people tend to gravitate towards the direction of what they talk about. If they talk about peak experiences, and not the problems of poverty, they will gravitate in that direction.

Unfortunately all schools do not necessarily function on an asset-based paradigm, i.e., dwelling on what people do have rather than what they don't, and affirming their hopes and abilities. We believe that when children's culture is valued, they will be motivated to excel. The cultural experiences of children and parents are important and need to be understood and acknowledged by all who work with children.

We attempt to address culture by placing emphasis on integrating the rich history of the Delta into the curriculum of the Children's Villages. We have a resource person who is an expert in how African-American children learn through a culturally relevant pedagogy. She works to integrate culture into their learning, such as looking at examples of leadership in the civil rights movement – visiting

museums, and inviting guest speakers – and the history of the Delta as the birthplace of the blues.

Let me hasten to add that there are programmes in schools that do this – February, for example, is African-American history month. However, it is our perspective that it's important for cultural affirmation to be integrated throughout the children's experience, because children learn best in environments in which they are affirmed culturally.

MDCP works on the premise that building strong and empowering relationships, in which people feel equally valued, is a collaborative process involving schools, parents and communities with the child at the centre. The Children's Villages provide spaces that are convenient for both teachers and parents and allow for even-handed feedback on a child's progress, with no shaming and blaming.

Children's Villages assess each child individually and allow for learning deficits which have been created by poverty to be tackled in real time. One child might be weak on vocabulary, another on phonics; the Children's Village teacher can send a note to the class teacher saying which child has been working on what. Last month I was invited by a school board to talk about how we can build the collaborative relationship between Children's Villages and schools; one good idea is including teachers from Children's Villages in the school's professional staff development activities.

We are in the formative stage of building relationships with schools, but the general attitude has been very receptive and supportive. This is in part because of the way we frame the issue. We focus on how this partnership can support a school's mission and goals, and help the school to be successful.

In the state of Mississippi, there is a system of school accountability in which schools are rated from a level of one to five on the basis of pupils' performances. We emphasise that Children's Villages have the goal of improving literacy and math; the school's ratings improve when the child performs better in those subjects. Schools want children to excel academically, and so do parents and communities. It's a win-win proposition.

So you may ask why does it take us to come along and point this out? Well, institutions are now recognizing the mutually rewarding benefits of community collaboration. We need to bring the message of reaffirming how much we need to collaborate and work in partnership.

It is our hope that collaboration will become the norm within the communities served by MDCP. Our vision of success is that communities, schools and parents realise the benefits of a mutually rewarding relationship without needing a Bernard van Leer Foundation or a Bettye Ward Fletcher to come along and catalyse the relationship. This model certainly has the potential for replication, especially as it involves building indigenous capacity.

We believe the partnerships MDCP is building will be sustainable because we leverage existing resources, maximise the use of natural and voluntary abilities, and build organisational capacity. Though the project is in its early stages, it also includes an evaluation mechanism so that as time passes we will be able to look at our objectives and see if we are making a difference in the lives of children, families and communities.

Notes

- 1 Dr. Bettye Ward Fletcher is a career academician, researcher and administrator. She is the founder and President of Professional Associates, Inc., a research and evaluation organisation which is engaged in programme development, evaluation, and capacity-building in rural and indigenous communities. This article benefited from additional input by Andrew Wright.
- 2 National Center for Children in Poverty, 2005
- 3 Bowman, 1999
- 4 Bowman, 1999

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