

Nicaragua

The centrality of parents

Where can and do parents fit into the programmes that support the development of their children? Parents themselves have clear views, as is shown by these extracts from a discussion with members of the Comité de Padres de Familia (the Parents' Committee) of the Los Cumiches Centre in a marginalised area of Managua, the capital of Nicaragua.

The centre has been developed with CANTERA, an NGO that has been working since 1989 on a community-based, integrated childcare and education programme in Ciudad Sandino, Managua. The aim has been to develop and support preschools across five areas. Included in this work is supporting the formation of Parents' Committees and helping them to acquire the skills, information and experience that they need to complement the work of the educators.

The members of the Los Cumiches Parents' Committee began by talking about their general roles and motivations, then recalled how nervous they felt about taking on important roles in the operation of the centre.

Our job is to collaborate with the principal of the centre and with the educators. If we decide that something should be done, we organise it ourselves. We do it with the preschool and the coordinator from CANTERA supports us.

We know we have something good here. I know it because my eldest children didn't have it and my youngest children do. And that's the motivation: supporting this to keep it all going.

I was very surprised and proud when I was elected. I was very nervous too but the other members helped me. The educators did too.

At the start, in the first days, we had meetings and we talked about our worries. We didn't have much

confidence because we didn't have any experience.

We asked ourselves 'What do we know about what should be going on here?'

When they wanted to elect me President of the Committee I said 'Ask someone else!' I didn't even know what the President was supposed to do. But nor did anyone else. They insisted and finally I said 'OK. But you must all help me'.



The parents then reflected on what they had learned together.

We've learned that you have to be practical. Find practical things to concentrate on. You build on your success in doing practical things. You learn as you go, you get better, you get more confidence, you take on more.

This is how it works. Maybe we are going to have a discussion with parents – perhaps about how things are in the school. Or if there are problems, about what needs to be done. Then we work out what the discussion has to cover. We work out how we will run the discussion too. Then we work out who will play which roles and how they will do that. For example, I have some roles as President, so we work those out.

We get a lot of parents at those meetings and I still get frightened when I stand up in front of them.

Getting them to come to meetings sometimes means you have to convince them. And there are some who are not interested. But usually it's because they have too many problems and too much else to do.

They are busy with their lives – just keeping going. You have to understand what they are doing with their time. You have to respect that so you can make it possible for them to be at meetings.

But when you show them how important it is, they can often find the extra energy.

We've learned that you have to take the initiative. Explain things to them, listen to them, make them feel part of everything.

You also have to make them feel that it's important that they are there. They might not feel important themselves.

Make them feel welcome too.

Do things with people, make things possible for them. Don't have too much going on, don't overload them.

The library's a good example. It works well: no one has time to do it by themselves but we have a rota, everyone can do a short time. That way it's always open when it's needed.

What we learned is that parents – especially mothers – are their children's first educators. So we've been helping parents to understand how important they are: they spend more time with their children than anyone else does.

We make sure they get the information they need ... helping the educators develop ideas and materials for use in the home: songs, activities and games. There's a theme and we help to work out how to make lessons around it for the home.

It's adding to what the educators do in the centre.

But you have to start by encouraging the parents to give their children the time that they need.

And if there are problems – like children not going to school – we can go and see what the problem is. Remind the parents how important the preschool is.

Now, with so many positive achievements behind them, these parents are considering how their roles should develop in the future:

Making the library work was an important experience for us. If we can learn from that, we can move more into the educational side of things. We don't have the experience, we don't know how the educators handle 25 children at a time. But it would be good to find ways to participate.

We need to know how to participate in the classrooms. We shouldn't assume that the educational work with the children is just for the educators. As parents, we have an obligation to do more than just clean the centre.

I've learned to learn and I've learned to take responsibility. And I'm surprised at what I can do.

Everyone of us can do something and together we can already do a lot.

The commitment of these parents, coupled with the support of CANTERA and the positive attitudes of the principal and the educators, has enabled them to develop important roles in the effective operation of the Los Cumiches Centre. But much more than this, they are not simply there to be exploited as a useful resource. Instead, they are a vivid demonstration of the grassroots, bottom-up, inclusive philosophy and environment of the centre: parental

involvement is one of the natural core elements in the centre's conceptualisation, operation and development.

The basis for a national plan

This kind of understanding of where parents fit, is also seen among those who make decisions about, and organise, preschool provision in Nicaragua. Juan José Morales, National Director of Preschool Education, vigorously promotes the centrality of parents to the healthy development of their children. But he also sees that not all parents understand the importance of the early years, or know what their children need. Here he outlines a new national plan that responds to these realities.

Parents are very anxious that their children develop well but what they often mean by this is that they want them to do well in school – get higher

grades; learn to write, read and count. They don't always understand the importance of the early years in children's development; and they don't always understand the importance of the activities that are essential to support that development – if their children are doing something that the parents can't find in text books, they don't think those activities are important. Play is an example: we have to show them not only how much children learn through play, but also how important it is that children do play and do learn through play. Parents shouldn't just be parents, friendly and responsible. Much more important, they should be children themselves sometimes ... so they can understand children.

We have now developed a series of publicity campaigns and a programme of activities to show parents the importance of the early years and to show them what they can do to support their children's

development. The point is to increase their motivation and make supporting their children a habit.

The crucial new aspect of the programme is that it covers children from zero to six years – in other words, it is not limited to the time children spend in preschools and have educators working with them. During the first three years, the parents are not just their children's first educators, they are also their only real educators. That's the major justification for the programme.

The programme includes two workshops each month and the themes and content include psycho-motor and psycho-social development. Also included are what and how children should learn, the importance of their creativity and so on. All of this is intended to offer practical information, advice and support to parents about what they can do with their children; and it

includes a section about how to make educational materials cheaply and easily for use in the home.

At the same time we have also developed a more open curriculum for use in preschools, with the help of an adviser from Chile. This takes into account children's creativity and also all those positive attributes and characteristics that young children have, and that programmes must build on and develop. Our educators are practical people who are well prepared for the important work that they do, but this curriculum is a challenge for them as they work to help children to develop healthily in all the areas that the curriculum covers. In fact, implementing this curriculum calls for training at all levels. It also calls for full participation by parents: once children begin to attend preschool centres, the centres need the parents to take on other – complementary – roles to sustain and build on what the preschools offer.

When you look at the programme for parents and the curriculum together, you can see how important the roles of parents are.

Ideal parents in the eyes of programme coordinators

The following extracts from a discussion among preschool coordinators from the City of Managua and the Ministry of Education show the kinds of roles that programme coordinators and educators expect – indeed need – parents to play in ECD programmes. The starting point of the discussion was 'Ideal parents'.

For me, it's important that the preschool work is integrated into the community as a whole, with the parents taking responsibility for the development of their children – the parents need to be a natural part of the educational environment, like educators. We may need to support them or help them to find out what they need to know and help them to

identify their special roles and fulfil them.

Bringing parents into all stages of work with children is essential: we need to build on what parents do; and we need them to build on what we do. They are closest to the children and that means that they can most easily see what children need.

The closer parents are to preschools, the more they understand and the more they can support what the preschool is trying to do.

They must be able to communicate well with their children, be loving and responsible, enablers who set examples, who help children develop values. To have children means taking responsibility for their development.

Parents must be active and effective in supporting their children – it's fundamental: they'll have a life long influence.

Conclusions

Taken as a whole, these reflections by parents, and by decision makers and coordinators, send out a clear message: that parents belong at the heart of early childhood programmes. But the reflections also provide many practical examples of the complexities of responding effectively to that message. ○