
SITE VISIT: The Child-to-Child Program in Botswana

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The Child-to-Child Program in Botswana has been designed to provide informal preschool education for young children while enhancing the educational experience of older, primary-level children. The older children (little teachers) help prepare the younger children (preschoolers) for school entry and in turn enhance their own cognitive and affective development. Beginning in 1979 with two schools, the program is now in operation in twenty-eight schools. Formal control of the program is held by the Board of the Child-to-Child Foundation of Botswana, which includes representatives from Ministry of Education and local government, multilateral and bilateral aid donors, and the American Women's Association.

Initially the Child-to-Child Program functioned as a one-to-one outreach program. Little teachers drawn from standards 1, 2 and 3 received two additional periods of instruction each week. To guide the Child-to-Child teachers, lesson booklets focussing on four major themes were developed: "Feelings and Who Am I?" "Preparing for School," "Health in the Home," and "The Village". More recently, greater emphasis is being placed on the development of basic writing and number skills.

Since 1981, the program has shifted its emphasis from out-of-school activities to in-school activities. Preschoolers come to school several times each week to participate in Child-to-Child sessions in which each preschooler is paired with a little teacher. The work of the little teachers is divided between school and home. Child-to-Child teachers hold a training session for the little teachers before each visit by the preschoolers. Although teachers are present during the in-school sessions for the preschoolers, their role is mainly organizational and supportive. The little teachers deliver most of the instruction.

After the in-school sessions, the pair continues to work at home practicing writing letters and numbers and learning simple songs and games. Sometimes the little teacher uses a worksheet prepared during the training sessions, but often the children write in the sand, using a finger as a writing instrument. In the next training session with the Child-to-Child teachers, the little teacher has an opportunity to report on his experience during these home lessons. Thus, the demand for an in-school program for the preschoolers has been met, but at the same time the original program for the little teachers has been maintained.

Several factors have contributed to the shift in focus from the home to the school. Child-to-Child teachers felt that the original approach did not allow enough opportunity to supervise the work of the little teachers. Furthermore, the organization of home-based programs is likely to have been the cause of problems that could easily have been avoided by moving the activities to the school. However, parental demand for institutionalized preschool education has perhaps been the most important factor in the recent shift. In Botswana, as in many other developing countries, the value of preschool education has risen steadily over recent years. As competition for formal employment has intensified, parents have sought to provide their children with educational experiences that will improve their chances of success. It is believed that children who get an early start to their education have an advantage in this competition.

In one of the schools, a Child-to-Child program has been running long enough for the first group of preschoolers to complete primary school. In this school, the results of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) showed a sharp improvement in 1996—the first year that there had been ex-preschoolers among the candidates. Both the Headmistress and the Chairman of the Parent Teachers Association are convinced that the Child-to-Child program has played a major role in this improvement. This success is largely attributed to the program's ability to provide the preschool child with opportunities to explore the school environment gradually, making the difficult transition to primary school a positive experience.

A second advantage of this approach is related to the provision of one-to-one tutoring for the preschooler, which is invaluable to the acquisition of the basic cognitive, psychomotor, and social skills. Finally, little teachers are important as "communication facilitators," since the adult teachers often misunderstand preschoolers speaking local dialects. Thus, given the increasing demand for early childhood care, the Botswana program provides an exciting and profitable programming option.

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