

The Early Childhood
Development Centres
in Benin

*A national health care and
education programme for
three- to five-year old children*

by

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THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CENTRES IN BENIN

A national health care and education programme for three- to five-year-old children in Benin. A joint project of the People's Republic of Benin and the International Children's Centre.

INTRODUCTION

In a country in which it has not yet been possible to provide schooling for all children of school age, it may seem rather paradoxical to establish a health care and education structure for children aged from three to five. This, however, is the situation in Benin; and it is a situation which has come about not by chance, but as a result of long reflection and deliberation.

The pre-school period is one of very great importance for the young child, since it is the period in which many skills and behaviour patterns are acquired. It demands a level of staffing and supervision that will promote all round development, the adoption of positive health care and social habits and make possible the prevention or early detection of handicaps.

To promote the health and education of a little one is to improve the chances of the schoolchild of tomorrow of making the most of his or her schooldays and to ensure progression to a balanced and fulfilling adult life.

I. THE BASIS AND ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

Young children are very vulnerable during the earliest years of their lives. Both their families and the institutions concerned are well aware of this and do the best they can, according to their means, to meet the children's needs, particularly with regard to health care. But a child's growth is not confined to purely physical aspects. He or she must also develop in such a way as to become emotionally and intellectually self-reliant and to be able to integrate fully with society.

The Early Childhood Development Centres were designed to provide an overall response to these needs that is suited to the various aspects of the young child's personality.

The Centres constitute the first stage of the educational system in Benin, to the fundamental principles of which they conform. They must provide each child, whatever his or her social or ethnic origin, with an overall education which will ensure harmonious physical, psycho-motor, intellectual and socio-affective development. In accordance with the pedagogical ideology of Benin, education must be achieved by the milieu, in the milieu, for the milieu, and with the resources of the milieu.

With these principles taken as a starting point, a long period of reflection and associated activities was begun. A detailed listing was made of the various solutions adopted by the people themselves to resolve the problems posed by young children at the family level.

None of the solutions put forward met both the needs of the children and the ideological and educational principles that had been established.

A study of the conditions of life of the young children of Benin aged from three to five was then undertaken in each of the provinces. A questionnaire was drawn up by a pluridisciplinary team (made up of psychologists, sociologists, pedagogical advisers, inspectors of basic education, doctors, nurses and social workers). After the questionnaire had been tested, each province launched an inquiry, classified the answers to the questionnaire and made an analysis of the results. A document was produced for each province which summarized the lives and activities of the three- to five-year-olds, their place in the family, their current situation and needs with regard to health, nutrition, education, their social and psycho-affective relationships and their parents' views as to how these needs could best be met.

The results of these inquiries were presented at a seminar at which the participants went more deeply into the specific needs of children and their families in each province and sketched out proposals for activities that could stimulate the overall development and activate the potential of this age group. The way of life in the various regions was seen to differ very considerably as between North and South and between rural and urban areas. In general, conditions were found to be worst in the rural areas.

A committee then attempted to make a synthesis of those

proposals that were commonly agreed and the various projects suggested. From the committee's deliberations two possible lines of action clearly emerged:

- (i) to establish Western style nursery schools adapted to local needs and resources;
- (ii) to establish a system in which the families and populations would be heavily involved and which would give pride of place to traditional culture. The objective would be to initiate the children, in their maternal language, in self-awareness, self-reliance, and discovery of their environment. The programme would be based on involvement of the family so as to make parents aware, through active participation, of their responsibilities in the educational process.

The first of these two possibilities was considered to be costly and not very satisfactory. It was also felt that it would tend to be of most benefit to the better-off sections of the population.

The second proposal seemed to correspond better to the political and ideological options chosen by Benin and to the country's diversity of cultures, as well as being better adapted to the resources available. Gradually the orientations of the national programme have been clarified. The main objective, with the active participation of the parents, is the overall care of all children aged from three to five, whatever their sex, their social or religious background, geographical location (urban or rural, in the north or the south of the country), with priority being given to children from the most needy families.

The units serving children living in the same village or locality are called Early Childhood Development Centres, a name which gives a clear indication of the fundamental purposes of this programme - the arousal and development of young children so as to give them the greatest possible opportunity of achieving the optimum harmonious physical, psychomotor, socio-affective and cognitive development, designed to facilitate adaptation to their social and physical environment.

A Few Dates

Before 1972, the People's Republic of Benin had no official nursery school education system. The only nursery schools in

existence were:

- a few kindergartens scattered around the provincial capitals under the tutelage of, successively, the Social Affairs Directorate, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Law and Justice, plus a handful of nursery schools either privately-run or organized by the Mayor of Cotonou, authorized by the Ministry of National Education and frequented by children from better-off families;
- a host of unauthorized, "undercover" crèches, located in the coastal region and known as "yimagbodje" (meaning literally "Off you go then so that I can get some peace"), which took in children from more modest families, and numerous Koranic schools in the north of the country.

1975. Introduction of the law laying down the principles of the national education system, with mention of nursery school teaching.

1976. All kindergartens brought under the authority of the Ministry of National Education.

1977. Studies begun with a view to the establishment of a system of nursery education, in collaboration with the International Children's Centre.

1980. Opening of the first Early Childhood Development Centres.

II. PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES AND PROGRAMMES

As their name indicates, the pedagogical principle on which the Centres are based is active arousal and development of young children in accordance with their interests and needs.

The objective is not at all costs to cram the children's heads with facts or "learning" judged to be suited to their age; nor does it consist of imposing on them by repetition and drilling, certain ways of behaving considered essential by their immediate social circle. The aim is to offer the children a form of activity that will lead them on to participate in their own individual development. To achieve this end the children are furnished with

suitable pedagogical materials and placed in realistic situations which motivate them, arousing their natural curiosity and stimulating them into activity.

Equipment as a Means of Stimulation

At the Centres, play-corners (a dolls' corner, a shopping corner, etc.) are set up, mainly using simple, salvaged materials. They entice the children into imitative, role-playing games through which they identify with and assimilate social models. There are also puzzles, space-matching games and games of lotto made by the monitors themselves and designed to develop attentiveness, reflection and perseverance, all qualities necessary for the apprenticeship for school life. Installations in the open air, which include slides, toboggans and climbing frames, and objects such as old car tires and balls, encourage physical and motor activity.

Since it is an essential activity through which children can express themselves physically and orally, play is an important element in the Centres, giving them an opportunity to make contact with each other and to begin the process of socialization.

A Variety of Motivating Situations

The activities that are proposed to the children, within the framework of a specific project,^{1/} are concentrated on discovery of their surroundings and involve the use of all their motor, sensory and intellectual faculties. Each project is built around a subject which is of interest to the children and will help to further their education. Underlying each project are the educational objectives ^{2/} of the project leader. When a subject is exhausted, another is embarked upon through a new pedagogical project. Depending on the fruitfulness of the subjects tackled and the monitor's ability to sense the pathways the children wish to explore, three or four pedagogical projects may be completed in the course of a year at an Early Childhood Development Centre.^{3/}

As with any project, there may, in practice, be some deviation from the programme as originally planned. It is important,

^{1/} Arranging a play-corner, organizing a meal for a party, creating a small garden...

^{2/} Harmonious development of the child, apprenticeship for life, acquisition of good health care habits, cultural integration...

^{3/} Cf. Annex 1. A day at an Early Childhood Development Centre

therefore, to foresee and be prepared to cope with the various different situations which may arise. This working method makes great demands on the monitors, who must be very attentive to the children's questions and reactions so as to be able to satisfy their curiosity fully. They do not have a strictly laid down programme but they must prepare the various activities with great care so as to achieve the pre-determined pedagogical objectives. They must combine close observation and creativity with an approach which is flexible yet faithful to their basic purpose. This is an effective method which is quite the opposite of more customary methods that involve the monotonous succession, hour after hour, day after day, of activities that have no connexion with each other. It gives coherence to the work of both the adults and the children, produces solid, stimulating and satisfying results for all, and facilitates openness and the integration of the Centres with the outside world.

Independently of the pedagogical projects, many other activities are undertaken; some of them take place daily, giving a rhythm to the days and enabling the children to acquire a sense of the structure of time.

The children's biological rhythms are taken into account in the organization of the day - in the alternation of activities, the timing of meals and other breaks, the arrangements made for the siesta, in particular, its staggered ending, which enables the needs of each individual child to be catered for.

Harmonious Development

The activities provided for the children are not designed to occupy them superficially or to fill in time. Their objective is the harmonious development of the child. They do not encroach upon the lessons to be learned in school but prepare the children to tackle them under the best conditions.

Although this may not always be immediately evident, many of the activities lead up to the learning of such basic skills as reading, writing and arithmetic. Tidying up, for example, is not just a banal task and the necessary time must be devoted to it. It is true that it helps the children to recognize the need for a certain order in the communal life, but, above all, it invites them to observe and to reflect. Tidying up, putting things in order, involves the resolution of a spatial problem (all the objects involved must fit into a given area) and the exercise of reasoning (grouping the objects according to definite criteria: colour, shape, nature, use, where they came from...). Practical actions such as these are a necessary prelude to more abstract operations.

Graphics^{4/} are employed in the Early Childhood Development Centres in just the same way that we talk to babies when they themselves are still unable to speak. Yet the aim of the Centres is not to make the children literate but to bring them to a prior stage of maturity that will enable them to learn to read and write without wasting too much time.^{5/}

The children need to be brought to a stage of maturity at which they are capable of abstract thought and can understand the meaningfulness of an abstraction. No purpose is served by simply rambling on; the children must first be made aware of graphics and their functions. For this reason, the children at the Centres are surrounded by a profusion of graphics of all kinds (drawings, symbols, phonetic and alphabetic writing). By handling pictures, drawings, catalogues they are made aware of the existence of symbols that have meaning. The monitors encourage the children to question them about the graphics and to look for indications in them that may help them to understand their meaning. In this way the monitors instil a sense of expectancy about graphics as a source of information. They inspire in the children a desire to read by reading them stories from books or by making books for them containing the stories they like. In this way the children discover that reading can also be a source of pleasure.

Understanding of writing develops as much from its interpretation as from the act of writing. We make use of it each time we need to remember something or to communicate with someone at a distance. The children become daily more familiar with writing, which for most of them, especially in the rural areas, is a whole new world. They become aware of the need for writing in life since they use it in a natural, functional manner.

During their time at the Early Childhood Development Centres, the children progress from motor and sensory exploration of writing to a more social and intellectual approach. Little by little, as they gain experience, they establish spatial and temporal reference points and discover that writing is based on conventions.

^{4/} Graphics: any symbolic representation using graphic signs (drawings, photographs, characters, pictograms, writing).

^{5/} Many children repeat their first year at school (19.47%) according to the statistics of the Ministry responsible for nursery education of the People's Republic of Benin.

The varied motor and manual activities which they perform lead the children to a degree of mastery of the movements called for in the act of writing. At the same time they are increasing their powers of abstract thought and developing their linguistic abilities. This mastery of language, an essential prerequisite to learning to write, is an indication of the children's mental, social and cultural development.

Language is the means whereby thought can be formed and expressed. Through constant use of the vocabulary and structure of the language in many varied situations, the children's thinking becomes refined, richer and more precise, all the more so since the language used in a Centre is that of the locality. This guarantees that the education dispensed will be a truly Benin education, ensures the harmonious integration of the children with their culture, and encourages good communication between the child, his or her peers, the monitors, the family and the other members of the community. It meets the need of the children for that creativity and expression so essential to the development of a balanced personality.

Full mastery of a local language provides a spring-board for the learning of other languages, making their acquisition easier and improving performance in them. ^{6/} It avoids the situation in which a person is incapable of expressing himself and communicating correctly in any language at all - for example, when he begins a sentence in one language and finishes it in another, or uses foreign words to replace those of his own language that he does not know.

It is not only through the use of local languages that the Centres reinforce the children's cultural identity. Great use is made of such elements of the cultural heritage as tales, stories, proverbs, songs, dances and games. Furthermore, the educational role played by the Centres is a prolongation and continuation of that played by the parents whose active participation is enlisted. Far from being "idealized institutions" specializing in the education of three- to-five-year-olds, the Centres are in direct contact with the children's normal environment which they teach them to understand and master.

Precision and flexibility are the hallmarks of the pedagogical methods of the Centres - precision in the clarity with which the objectives to be attained are defined, and flexibility in the way in which programmes can be adapted to accommodate the individual needs of the children.

^{6/} Experiments have shown that children who have fully mastered their maternal language can learn a second language more easily and obtain better results in that second language than do monolingual children in their only language.











III. ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE AND STAFFING

Administrative Structure

The Directorate of Nursery Education, under the auspices of the Ministry of Nursery and Basic Education, is responsible for the Early Childhood Development Centres.

At the national level, in addition to its administrative role, the Directorate of Nursery Education is responsible, in part, for the initial training of monitors within the National School for Monitors of Early Childhood Development Centres, for the supervision and assessment of monitors in the course of tours of inspection throughout the country, as well as for in-service training.

This is a very heavy task and inexperienced monitors newly arrived in the field sometimes feel very isolated and defenceless. To alleviate this problem, refresher seminars have been organized for area education heads, pedagogical advisers and basic education inspectors. The Directorate of Nursery Education has also created a newsletter which enables monitors to keep in contact with each other and with the national headquarters. It contains articles on pedagogical subjects and administrative news as well as accounts of interesting practical experiences contributed by the monitors themselves.

Supervisory teams are also being set up at the Provincial Education Directorates, but as yet not all provinces have them.

Visits to the Centres by supervisors enable any pedagogical problems encountered by the monitors to be noted so that in-service seminars can be organized to plug any gaps, improve professional methods and complete the initial training received at the National School for Monitors. Some seminars have concentrated on the manufacture of toys and games, on the children's health and their initiation into health care practice; other seminars have covered the training of educational resource persons or the teaching-by-project method.

At present the burden on the Directorate of Nursery Education is a very heavy one and supervision at the local level is still insufficient.

The initial training of monitors is carried out at the National School for Monitors for Early Childhood Development Centres

which comes under the Ministry of Secondary and Higher Education. Although initial training and in-service training do not come under the same Ministry, there are links between the two. Officials of the Directorate of Nursery Education form part of the team of instructors of the National School for Monitors for Early Childhood Development Centres, and practical training takes place in the Centres. The Directorate of Nursery Education and the National School for Monitors are jointly responsible for professional examinations.

The Monitors

The Centres are staffed by monitors, each monitor being responsible for from twenty-five to thirty children. According to the size of the child population, each Centre has one or more monitors.

The monitors (both men and women) are civil servants who have achieved a scholastic level equivalent to that of the certificate of completion of the first cycle of secondary education. They are selected by the Provincial Directorates of Education (there is one Directorate in each of the six provinces of Benin) on the basis of their knowledge of the local language or languages, personality and level of motivation. After a year's training at the National School for Monitors for Early Childhood Development Centres, at Porto Novo (Ouémé), they are assigned by the Ministry of Nursery and Basic Education to an area whose language or languages they speak.

The training is predominantly practical, but also includes a theoretical element. The monitors study the different facets of child development - special needs, health, physical growth and psychomotor development. They enrich their personal knowledge in the fields of health, the traditional pharmacopoeia, national languages and their transcription, and environmental studies. They receive administrative and ideological instruction and learn how to make games and toys. They take practical courses at selected Centres where they learn how to organize a Centre, to observe the children and to communicate with them and with their families, the local authorities and their own superiors. They build up for themselves a "stock" of games and toys and of local tales, songs, dances and proverbs. In short, they acquire a training in the education of children that conforms to the overall spirit of the project.

Parent and Community Participation

Responsibility for the health care and education of the children is not the sole responsibility of the monitors. The Centres are the responsibility of all, and each parent and each member of the community is expected to contribute.

A request for the opening of a Centre involves an undertaking on the part of the community to ensure its smooth functioning in the spirit in which the Centres were conceived and to participate at all stages - finding a monitor, the material construction of the Centre, sharing in the educational process, etc. Thus, responsibility for the education of children is not the State's alone; there is, as it were, a contract between the people and the administration. Parents participate at a material, cultural, and educational level.

The material contribution consists of:

- provision of a building to receive the children. This will be simple, modest, in harmony with the local architecture and meet certain standards of hygiene. The necessary precautions will be taken to avoid accidents;
- collaboration in the equipping and maintenance of the Centre and the manufacture of furniture and toys;
- provision of various locally available materials as and when required for different activities;
- meeting the children's food requirements and giving permission for health care supervision;
- helping with certain activities such as weighing the children, vaccinations, their initiation into music, cooking, stock-raising, agriculture, various trades, etc.

Cultural participation involves the parents, in collaboration with officials, agreeing on the values to be inculcated (discipline, liberty, self-reliance, creativity, learning about the moral values of their culture, patriotism, respect for elders, etc.) and the way in which this is to be achieved (punishments, rewards, answering the children when they ask "why", etc.).

The educational involvement of parents enables them to have a positive, active understanding of the needs and potential of young children. In addition, it is not possible for the monitor to become a specialist in all the many subjects (ranging from music, care of animals, cooking, first aid, farming, the arts, etc.) in which he or she is expected to work with the children.

The participation of parents and others from outside the Centres is not haphazard. It is the monitor's responsibility to select and plan the use of these "human resources" in such a way

that everyone benefits to the maximum. Such interventions can, however, sometimes be fortuitous. Always alert to the opportunities offered by some special event or the unexpected presence of someone of special interest, a monitor will not hesitate to abandon the normal programme temporarily to take advantage of such an occasion. In most cases, however, the participation of people from outside the Centre, whether occasional or regular, is arranged to fit into the activities provided for under the pedagogical plan at the most opportune moment.

The monitors, the educational assistants, the families and the community in general share many practical and educative tasks in a manner which is not strictly defined. The role of the families is very important and parents who so desire can play a leading part. Monitors who efface themselves and make full use of the human resources of the locality, thus making parents and others aware of their educative abilities, are, in fact, fully discharging their functions.

This attitude promotes the integration of monitors into the local community and encourages everyone to participate. Putting themselves on an equal footing with the families makes it easier for the monitors to enter into a dialogue with them. In this way they can, on the spot, help the parents to understand their children's needs and discover their personalities and at the same time explain the underlying basis of their pedagogical methods. Watching their children progress and their self-reliance and assurance grow, the parents come to appreciate and adopt the educational principles of the Centres. Only through the involvement of the families can the educational process achieve a permanent effect. No gap must be created between the knowledge and behaviour patterns the children acquire at the Centres and family customs and practices; there must be no break with the local setting.

The monitors often experience difficulty in getting the parents to understand some of the basic options of pre-school education. If they do not want the Centres to be gradually transformed into ordinary primary schools, the monitors have to bring home to the parents, day after day, that young children have certain basic needs which must be respected - to play, to get sufficient sleep, to speak their maternal language and to prepare themselves for schooling, but yet not undertake too much, and to be given their fair share of attention. ^{7/} The pressure from the families is all

^{7/} Young children need a certain amount of attention from adults if they are to progress. At this stage of their development they are individualists. Each child is different and progresses at his or her own pace. In this spirit, the number of children has been set at no more than 25 per monitor or educational assistant. Demand on the part of families is strong, though, especially in urban areas, and it is not easy to convince them to open another Centre rather than enrolling their children in overcrowded conditions. Priority should be towards the most needy families.

the stronger in that it stems from their desire for their children to be successful in life.^{8/} It takes long and frequent discussions and reflection, based on mutual trust, to convince the families, to calm their natural apprehensions and to get them to adopt the right attitude and behaviour. This is a long and delicate task, but it is well worthwhile undertaking for the long-term benefit of the children.

The Educational Assistants

In addition to the monitors, the parents and other human resources, some Centres also have the services of educational assistants. The original plan was that the children would be entrusted to educational assistants who would be trained and supervised by the monitors, with each monitor being responsible for five Centres.

Unlike the monitors, the educational assistants (both men and women) are not civil servants but are recruited locally by the political/administrative authorities. No diploma is required, but they must be at least eighteen years old, be in good health and belong to the community in which they are going to work. They must be well integrated into and be recognized and accepted by the community and speak its language or languages. They are usually paid by the District, in some cases the sub-District, education authorities or by the local Parents' Association. They are given a purely practical training by the monitors and are then put in charge of a group of children (each group is kept, as far as this is possible, to a maximum of twenty-five children).

At present no more educational assistants are being recruited.

The original arrangement aimed at providing for the greatest number of children at the lowest possible cost. However, in some of the poorest areas, the system of educational assistants has been brought into question since the parents are unable to pay for them and, in the long term, it is not possible to rely on the educational assistants to serve on a voluntary basis. The problem is made more acute by the fact that in other areas some educational assistants

^{8/} The parents do not always understand why French is not spoken and why reading and writing are not taught at the Centres. This they feel would enable their children to get on more quickly and mean a better future for them.

receive a salary and work alongside the monitors who are paid by the State. Many communities have requested that they, like the monitors, be paid by the Government. This has been judged to be out of the question since the State has not the resources to create a new category of civil servants. Furthermore, the quality of the educational programmes depends on the level of qualification of the monitors and educational assistants. Instead of being educational establishments as planned, the Centres would be in danger of becoming merely crèches. A great deal was at stake. Having opted for a system of quality education, the Government of Benin has therefore chosen to slow down expansion of the scheme.

IV. CONCLUSION

At a time when many countries are seeking solutions, it is important to make known Benin's experience in handling the health care and education of young children. It is presented here as an example and not as a model. The network of Early Childhood Development Centres is a new and experimental structure that has been constantly evolving since its creation. It is not claimed that the Centres are perfect even though they have made great progress since their inception. They are designed for both urban and rural areas and spread throughout Benin. They are not yet available to all children of their target age group, but attendance is growing year by year.

Among the various experiments carried out worldwide, they represent an original formula. With regard to the conception of programmes and activities for young children from three to six, two main trends can be distinguished: that followed in the better off countries and social classes where stress is laid on intellectual stimulation, and that followed by the less favoured countries in which priority is given to meeting health care and nutritional needs. Benin has opted for a solution that lies somewhere between these two: all the children's needs are taken into account and the main objective is to achieve a harmonious balance between them.

The Centres also represent an interesting alternative so far as their structure is concerned. They are institutionalized yet they do not take the place of the family or the members of the community, who retain all their rights concerning the care of their young children. Nevertheless, the involvement of the parents in the conduct of activities designed for the children is not without its difficulties. It is particularly difficult in urban areas where the parents are hampered by fixed working hours, yet it is of capital

importance for the children since it brings the parents into the educational framework and enables them to become more competent through their contacts with professionals. Parent involvement is not the only source of difficulty. Many improvements are still needed in the training of personnel. That of key staff, in particular, remains critical since on them depends the evolution and long-term continuation of the project.

Annex 1

A Day at an Early Childhood Development Centre

Meeting the needs of parents and children

On her way to school, Jocelyne accompanies her younger sister Abadjaye and Sonagnon, the young boy from next door, to the Centre. The children chat together as they set off on foot for the Centre, which is not very far. Abadjaye is carrying some ablo joki^{9/} for her lunch. Sonagnon, whose mother had to go off to market very early, is clutching in his pocket a coin with which he will buy some gruel or rice from the food supplier who calls at the Centre each day at break-time.^{10/}

When they arrive at the Centre, Jocelyne hands over the two young ones to the lady monitor who compliments Abadjaye on her pretty hair-style and examines Sonagnon's knee which she had tended the day before after he had had a minor fall. Abadjaye goes into the building, puts her picnic away and joins a small group of children who are busy helping the educational assistant to clean and tidy up the place. Sonagnon dashes out into the courtyard and goes towards the climbing frame on which several daring boys are already playing. When it seems that all the children have arrived, the monitor gathers together the youngest children, amongst whom is Abadjaye who is three and a half years old. Sonagnon, who will be five in two months time, joins the other "big ones" whom the educational assistant is looking after.

Activities based on play

Around each adult activities are being organized. It is still not too hot, so the educational assistant takes his group out into the courtyard and suggests a game. "We have been to the market and we have bought some gari.⁽¹¹⁾ Now we have to take it home to Mummy." This means crossing the river, climbing to the top of the hill and going round the village. The gari

^{9/} Small conical or round-shaped cakes made of cassava flour.

^{10/} In some Centres the monitor or assistant monitor arranges for a meal to be provided every day, for which the parents make a small contribution.

^{11/} Cassava flour

*Very low
cost
materials*

is represented by sand contained in plastic bottles. what the children have to do is to carry the bottles without spilling the sand as they balance their way across a fallen tree trunk, clamber over the climbing frame and then walk round the sand pit on the bricks with which it is bordered. Absorbed in the game, the children forget their true surroundings.

*Building up
good health
habits*

Meanwhile, inside, the monitor takes advantage of the fact that one of the children has a heavy cold to teach all of them how to blow their noses properly.

It is now time for break, one of the best moments of the day, a time to chat and learn about all sorts of things. The children learn to wash their hands and then sit down to eat. Abadjaye tucks into her ablo yoki.

*Activities
that
coincide
with the
interests
of the
children*

She tells the monitor and her young friends how her mother makes them. Several children say that their mothers also make them but none of them can explain the recipe properly. The monitor suggests that the children ask their mothers about it. Perhaps one of the mothers will invite the children one day soon to visit her house to watch them being made. Or else they could be made at the Centre for the fête... The children seem interested and the Monitor notes the idea.

*An education
in the
children's
own cultural
context*

The break is over and the remains of the meal are cleared away. The children disperse to all the various activity corners. Abadjaye goes towards Ablawa, the big rag doll made by the monitor. She talks to the doll and arranges her hair with a comb and ribbons. She lays her down on the rush matting, wraps her in a cloth and carries her on her back. In the dolls' corner, the game is organized: Abadjaye is the mother and all the children take their roles seriously.

On a large rush mat on the floor the children play with puzzles and space-matching games made by the monitor, who questions the children, encourages them and gets them thinking.

The bigger children are engaged in other activities. The shopping corner is in utter disarray. Empty tins

*From the
concrete
to the
abstract*

of tomato sauce are all mixed up with empty sardine tins: plastic bottles lie higgeldy-piggeldy on the floor mixed up with pasta packets and empty shellfish shells. Sonagnon and some of his friends have to work out how to stack them in a logical order.

*Each child's
biological
rhythm*

It is nearly time to go home. The children tidy up, and then gather together. They sing a song and then it is time to leave as there is no canteen to serve lunch. It is three o'clock in the afternoon when Sonagnon and Abadjaye return. The scene has changed. Almost the entire floor is covered with rush mats. The children stretch out for the siesta. Abadjaye is soon fast asleep, but Sonagnon is not sleepy. He joins the other non-sleepers in the reading corner. Books made at the Centre stand cheek by jowl with photographs taken from old calendars, drawings, pages from newspapers and post-cards. The children discuss the pictures in low voices and make guesses as to the meaning of the text which the assistant monitor confirms or rejects. As the children wake up, one by one, they get up and, when they feel ready to do so, they go to one of the activity corners. Outside, the monitor is introducing some of the children to the rudiments of gardening. Some sprays of hibiscus are planted out to decorate the courtyard, as well as some peanut cuttings which will be carefully tended and observed over the coming weeks.

There are many things to be done and the time passes quickly. It is already time to put things away. The children gather together to listen to a story, to recite a last poem and then it is time to leave. Abadjaye and Sonagnon say goodbye to the monitor and educational assistant and are taken home by Jocelyne. They have many things to tell her and later the other members of the family.

Tomorrow the Centre will come to life again. But through the vagaries of time and events, it will be different from today, just as will the adults and the children who breathe life into it.

TO ENQUIRE MORE DEEPLY

- A booklet:

Growing up in the People's Republic of Benin. People's Republic of Benin/International Children's Centre, 1985.

- Two videotapes:

One day you will be grown up, children of Benin. An instrumental videotape (running time about 20 minutes).

Awake Children of Benin...to build the future. An information videotape (running time about 10 minutes).

People's Republic of Benin/International Children's Centre,
Ciné Vertige, 1986