

FEATURE STORY

A RAY OF HOPE

A Ray of Hope is based on UNICEF's intervention in the upgrade of classroom facilities including enhancement of teaching/learning activities and parent-teacher-child participation strategies for 150 children in Grade 3 of the Ketley Primary School in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana. These are the reactions after six weeks of intervention. The programme will continue to the end of the academic year in July 2007.

The **Ketley Primary School** is one of the very over-crowded schools in a depressed location in Charlestown, Georgetown.

Limited furniture, many of which are broken, little or no parent involvement, high indiscipline and teachers who appear to have ineffective techniques are contributing factors which affect the achievement level and completion rates in this school.

Ketley Primary is one of the schools engaged in the "Magnet Schools Project" supported by UNICEF which sets out to encourage active student, teacher and parent participation for ensuring greater attendance, active learning and ultimately higher achievements levels for all children.

In addition to the regular programming of the "Magnet School", this added intervention gives greater attention to the physical facilities, group and individual counselling to students and teachers, greater variety of child friendly learning material and individual and focus groups discussion for children and parents. Continuous monitoring of progress is a key factor in the intervention.

I remember Grade 3 on September 4, my first visit to the school: a very noisy space with children sitting in rows, some with book bags on their backs and 4 teachers each lifting her voice above the normal tone to be heard. Each crowded class was separated by a blackboard.

October 19, my second visit: I note that there is an industrious buzz as children engage in discussions in groups of six with their teachers facilitating same. Still somewhat cramped there appears to be a bit more space since my first visit.

Teacher Shanta welcomes me and immediately tells the group of 150 students to extend the morning welcome. One student remarks, "the lady come again, the one who office bring the books, television, clean water and talk to we moda and fada at the meeting that we been to."



Students sit three in a bench, some with bag- packs on their backs.

A discussion with the teachers gave a feeling of satisfaction. Teacher Ederle admits, "when the headmistress encouraged us to come to the training sessions during our August holidays, I was not excited but I can now see the benefits." Ms. Grace, the untrained teacher added, "yes , now we have more time to spend with the individual children. But this new system calls for a lot of planning and we spend some extra time together after school." Ederle continues, "but we leave school less tired and less hoarse." But Ms. Grace still has some concern. She says, "I really hope we can keep the interest of the children and the parents. These first few weeks, the parents are very supportive and are interested in every one of the parent education sessions." Turning to her colleagues, she says, " Savitri's father said that at least we don't call them to meeting to 'buse (abuse) them but they good for nothing children and to ask for money."

Rajendra, a cute round face child smiles with me and I ask, "Do you like the new seating arrangement?" He shyly replies "yes". His friend Mitzi volunteers, "me getting to know more children and me have four teachas. Before, me had one, and we can help we friends with the work and teachas don't vex with we for that."



I ask Robert for his comments. His response is, “bring more toys and floor mats for we sit and read on the floor.” Maria offers, “Me modda say she like the teaching she and de other parents getting”. Suddenly, a quiet little girl, Tinesha announces “but Miss dem teacha does still rough we up sometimes.” And, as though to defend the teachers, her friend retorts, “but that does only happen when we behave really bad.”

A chat with the Head mistress reveals that she is concerned about the teachers’ ability to sustain the enthusiasm of the parents who have been making every effort to attend the sessions on peace education, child rights and the preparation of low cost nutritious snacks.

Gradual improvement - Students now two in a bench with more classroom space

She admits that the teachers need lots of encouragement as the strategies are very new to them and the involvement of parents in the daily activities is sometimes overwhelming. She thinks aloud that this ray of hope and the change over the first six weeks – greater attendance, parent involvement, decreased noise level - must be sustained as Ketley Primary can begin to dream of having awardees at the annual Ministry of Education national awards ceremony.