Shepherd, Debra: Stellenbosch University
debra@sun.ac.za
Authors: Debra Shepherd (Stellenbosch University)
Wendy Janssens (Vrije University)
Eldridge Moses (Stellenbosch University)

Title: When the results surprise us: The short and long term effect of an early childhood parenting intervention in the Caribbean

Early childhood experiences lay the foundations for later outcomes. Childhood development cannot, however, be understood separate from its cultural and socioeconomic context. Children from disadvantaged households face a greater risk of developmental delays linked to a lack of cognitive stimulation, responsive parenting and nutrition. This has important results for social inequality and the poverty-trap cycle. The Roving Caregiver Program (RCP), an intervention program targeted at vulnerable families with young children, has been widely adopted throughout the Caribbean. This program has the aim of changing parenting practices to advance health child development. RCP was introduced as a quasi-experimental study into 15 communities in 2 districts of St Lucia in 2007, with 461 participating and control community children followed at five different time points over a total period of seven years. We show estimates of the short-term intention-to-treat effects of the program on child social-emotional and cognitive outcomes to be insignificant, and even negative. Given these surprising, and rather counter-intuitive findings, we explore the interaction of RCP with household and parent socio-economic factors, particularly caregiver employment and enrollment in center-based care, over the short to long term. We find that dynamic changes in the socio-economic context of the household plays an important role intervening role in RCP impact. We believe this to be of vital practical significance, particularly when impact evaluations reveal insignificant treatment effects in aggregate, and brings to the fore the reality that interventions, particularly in social and household contexts, do not operate within a vacuum.