

This was a comparative study of children who attended day-care centres with those who stayed at home in St. Lucia. The children came from very similar social backgrounds and were compared using anthropometry and their performances at the Bettye Caldwell Preschool Inventory and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary tests. The quality of the service given in the day care centres was assessed. Finally the environment of the centres was compared with that of the homes of the community children.

The sample consisted of 60 children, 30 in three rural government centres and 30 from the communities nearest the centres. There were 28 boys and 32 girls with an age range of 40-64 months and a mean age of 51.7 ± 5.7 months.

It was found that there was no significant difference between the combined centre and the combined community anthropometry values. No significant difference was found between the centre and community children in the Peabody Picture Vocabulary raw scores (centre mean - 16.5 ± 4.6 ; community mean - 15.9 ± 6.9). However significant difference was found in the Bettye Caldwell Preschool Inventory total scores between centre (mean = 33.8 ± 7.7) and community children (mean = 27.7 ± 8.1), $p < 0.01$. School achievement and language development test scores were similar to those of four year old Dominican children, but lower than those of Jamaican children.

The centres were found to offer an environment richer in play equipment than that of the homes, but not necessarily safer or with greater adult-child interactions. The centres were found to be deficient in safety measures such as fire safety, first aid, monitoring of health and nutritional status, furniture available, toilet facilities for the children and staff, and space available for the children to play. The staff had duties other than child care, and although reasonably qualified, with a reasonable staff-child ratio of 1:12.5, interaction with the children was limited.

It was concluded that a higher school achievement was associated with attendance at the centre and may be attributed mainly to the presence of the higher level of play equipment offered at the centre. Attention should be paid to the improvement of safety measure, monitoring of health and nutritional status and availability of outdoor space. It is suggested that possibly training of the mothers to interact with their children may improve the school achievement scores of the community children.