

The State of Early Childhood Provision in Dominica

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The science of early childhood development

"From the moment of conception to the initial tentative steps into a kindergarten classroom, early childhood development takes place at a rate that exceeds any other stage of life. The capacity to learn and absorb is simply astonishing in the first years of life.

Raising a child is therefore one of the most complicated and important challenges for parents, caregivers and policy makers. *How* we do it is a highly personalised and sharply politicised issue, in part because every person can claim some level of "expertise". The debate has been especially intense as discoveries about early human development - in the womb and in the first few months and years - have reached the popular media.

Perhaps most important is the unequivocal conclusion that what happens during the first few months and years of life absolutely does matter, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well being, but because it sets either a sturdy or a fragile base for what follows. The early stages of life have the potential for being a rich and rewarding foundation that will support a child all the way into adulthood".

This quotation is taken from the report of the Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine in the U.S.A.¹ It was published just before Christmas 2000 and represents the work of a two and a half year project to evaluate and integrate the current science of early childhood development. It reflects not only the accumulation of knowledge in early childhood science and the interrelated nature of strands of that knowledge (cognitive, environmental, social, behavioural, emotional) but also evaluates the constraints to the capacity to use the knowledge effectively. In particular, it analyses:

- the changing nature, schedule and amount of work engaged in by parents of young children,
- the levels of economic hardship among families,
- the growing numbers of children spending considerable time in child care and pre school settings of variable quality, and
- the greater awareness of the negative effects of stress on young children, particularly as a result of serious family problems and adverse community conditions that are detrimental to child well being.

A fundamental reexamination of the nation's responses to the needs of young children and their families is called for in light of the convergence of changing circumstances and advancing knowledge.

Advocates, policy makers and practitioners in early childhood in Dominica will nod in recognition of the Committee's findings, and recognise within their own national efforts a confirmation of the steps they are taking. They will also recognise the value of the renewed impetus that this evaluation and integration of the science of early childhood development will bring.

Raising the profile of early childhood issues in Dominica and the Caribbean region

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, advocates in Dominica were not alone in the CARICOM Region of the Caribbean in promulgating the need for such a fundamental reexamination of a nation's and a region's response to the changing and worsening circumstances in which young children are raised.

The basic argument for reexamination presented at that time (approximately 1995-7) was based on the following realities and research findings: Most Caribbean governments begin their formal investments in people with major public expenditure for primary education, after critical shaping has already taken place. Despite high primary

enrolment, half of the children graduating from primary school will have repeated at least one year, and a quarter will have dropped out. Primary school teachers were expressing concern that children at school entry (usually between 5 and 6 years of age) seemed not to be developed sufficiently to make the transition into school successfully. As poor children enter primary school, UNICEF² cited the close association between lack of achievement and low self-esteem, anxiety, inadequate nutrition, low haemoglobin levels and frequency of visits to health clinics. This multi dimensional picture presented a much more fundamental problem than lack of 'readiness' for school. There was also a wealth of research available pointing to the links between improvements in readiness for and access to education and improvements in economic productivity. For example, that an extra year of primary education increases the future productivity of a person (in terms of hourly wage) between 10 and 30%.³

Concurrently, poverty assessments undertaken in the Region, including Dominica (1995), revealed that one in every three children was living in poverty. In general, poverty was highest among women and children in rural areas. Although traditionally child rearing had been a role ascribed to one gender in the home context, increasingly it was the women who headed 30-40% of the region's households and whose participation in the labour force was steadily increasing. Concerns regarding births to unprepared and immature teenage mothers; the numbers of children in the poorest quintile of society who leave secondary institutions without certification and barely literate, ending up in the ranks of the non-employed; the apparent rise in the instance of reported child abuse and exploitation; and the increase in crimes committed by the under 25's, were all expressions of the social and economic circumstances under which children and young people were living which contributed to the high costs of corrective and remedial programmes for addressing problems as they surfaced in later life.

The concern for young parents was underscored by the findings of the PAHO Caribbean Adolescent Health Survey conducted in Dominica and three other countries in the region during 1997. The findings included: more than 40% of sexually active youth commenced sexual activity below the age of ten (10) and an additional 29% at eleven (11) or twelve (12) years; half of all adolescents who are sexually active report no use of contraception at last intercourse; 20% percent of teens 16 – 18 report having been physically abused while 12.5% report sexual abuse; and, most young people felt they could not talk with their parents about personal issues.

Emerging from research on gender socialisation,⁴ the precarious position of boys gave increasing cause for concern in the region. Educational achievement research suggested in some areas that boys were less prepared on entry to schools than girls, and were steadily outnumbered by girls in achievement and enrolment until tertiary levels where their participation was reduced to as little as one for every two girls.

The impetus to political leadership generated by the Caribbean Plan of Action

The concerted advocacy of practitioners was given critical support by UNICEF Caribbean Area Office (CAO) and culminated in the preparation of the Caribbean Plan of Action for Early Childhood Care, Education and Development. The Plan of Action was endorsed by all CARICOM Heads of Government in July 1997. The involvement of CARICOM at the final stage was critical. It brought to the attention of policy makers the importance of early childhood development to the strategy for human resource development in the region as a whole. In the introduction to the Plan, the link between *investment* in the early years and the *outcomes* for the economy was made explicit. "In the Caribbean, there has been widespread recognition that as we face the challenges of the new century, with the development imperatives dictated by the global economy, the quality of human resources will be the most critical factor in achieving and maintaining a high level of competitiveness." The research evidence is acknowledged also:

"Research evidence has indicated the crucial importance of Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) to the success of any initiative in human resource development. *It is clear that the responsibility for ECED extends far beyond the boundaries of Ministries of Education.* The current situation in the region, however, is that this has been a neglected area, especially in terms of policy direction, administrative coordination and concrete programmes which take into account the importance of integrated provision of services for the sector. Perusal of allocations by Governments and others in this area *indicates inequities of provisions within and across sectors which are not commensurate with their recognized importance and need.*"⁵ (author's emphasis)

The Caribbean Plan of Action provided goals, mechanisms and strategies to achieve nine specified objectives within the 1997 – 2002 time frame:

1. Legislative framework for coordinated provision of services and monitoring of standards in the sector.
2. Integrated social planning and implementation of initiatives.
3. Adequate financing.

4. Equitable access to quality provisions to minimise the plight of the large percentage of children in high-risk situations.
5. Education and training for all providers of early childhood education and development.
6. Appropriate curriculum development and materials development towards improving quality of ECECD provisions.
7. Increased parent, community and media awareness and involvement.
8. Coordinated action at both national and regional levels and multi-sectoral participation (government, NGO and private sectors).
9. Increased research to inform development of the sector.

The Plan of Action contained detailed descriptions of the current situation, constraints and opportunities related to each major issue, recommendations for strategies and actions, and a suggested distribution of responsibility. It was intended as a general guideline and each country was expected to revise and adapt the detailed components to suit local priorities, needs and circumstances and to fully implement it by the year 2002.

This emerging interest in early childhood by governments, as indicated by the ratification and endorsement of relevant documents commencing with the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) and culminating in the Caribbean Plan of Action, was followed up by tentative steps within each country in the period 1997-2000. The elements of the plan presented a huge challenge. Whilst the premise that early childhood development "absolutely does matter" was not in question, it was by no means automatically the case that governments would take either immediate action or responsibility for initiating action. Governments in the Region were generally engaged in education reform programmes at tertiary, secondary and primary levels. A common response was that they would "get to early childhood" but only when they could. An underlying message seemed to express uncertainty as to the nature and extent of government's role in what was perceived as being essentially a private, family matter. The veteran practitioners in the private sector and non-governmental organisations greeted their governments' mixed message with scepticism. How and when would the plan be translated into country based actions?

Leadership and progress in Dominica

Untypically in the Region, Dominica's actions were swift. Education reform in the countries comprising the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) included the development of model Education legislation. Dominica was the first country to pass the new Education Act in 1997. The Act provides for the regulation of pre-primary education services within the private sector subject to the policies, programmes and plans provided by the Minister. The Act also provides for the innovation of a Council on Pre-primary Education (CPE) to advise the Minister on policies to guide the implementation of pre-primary education services. In this new landscape of legislative reform, the Caribbean Plan of Action acted as a catalyst in two important developments in 1998. The first was in the preparation of the Education Sector Plan by the Ministry of Education in which the Education Planning Unit, under the direction of Mr. Zechariah Pollock, ensured that the first chapter dealt comprehensively with the needs of and the plans for the early childhood sector. The second was in the initiative by the Social Centre in Dominica, under the direction of Mrs. Roma Douglas, the major provider and sponsor of early childhood services in the non-governmental sector, to embark on a project to evaluate the status of early childhood provision nationally. Both developments were supported by UNICEF, with technical assistance from Caribbean Child Development Centre. Both were considerably strengthened by the action in June 1998 of the Chief Education Officer, Mr. Anthony Lockhart, to establish the Council on Pre-primary Education. The key persons and agencies from the private, government and non-governmental early childhood sectors began to work together under the mandate to establish a regulatory framework for the sector (to include standards for physical infrastructures, curriculum, training, ratios and qualifications). It is under the auspices of the Council that the responsibility falls for tackling the state of early childhood provision and for generating the strategies required for regulating and improving the quality of services provided.

The context of the Early Childhood Sector in Dominica

The findings of the Social Centre/UNICEF survey of the quality of early childhood provision should be viewed in the light of the restricted access to services in general in the country, and the capacity of staff to provide stimulating environments. 54% of children of pre school age have access to pre-schools and day care centres. 27% of the teachers or caregivers in the sector have between one and five subjects at CXC or GCE. Salaries for pre-school teachers range between EC\$190 to EC\$1,900 monthly and for caregivers the rates are lower. There is no motivation or reward in salaries as low as these. On average a primary school teacher earns three times more.

There are 82 pre-schools in operation, many of which operate as single session centres (generally between 9 am and 12 pm) in term times. There are 6 day care centres. All these early childhood facilities are privately run, 19

sponsored by the Social Centre, 43 by private individuals and 26 with assistance from the Churches.

This is not an unusual situation in the Caribbean where most provision for early childhood is made in the private sector. However Dominica has the lowest spending level of any government in the region in the provision of support to the sector. The highest reported expenditure on early childhood provision expressed as a percentage of the national budget is in Barbados (1.52%) and the lowest is in Dominica (0.01%).⁶ Government expenditure on support to the early childhood sector includes the salaries of an Assistant Education Officer and Training Coordinator, and grants and subventions amounting to approximately EC\$60,000 (1999/2000):

1. To assist a number of pre-schools approved by the Chief Education Officer with the payment of rent and salaries
2. To provide educational materials and supplies for the training of pre-school teachers
3. To monitor the operations of pre-schools throughout the state.

In addition, training is provided by the Social Centre and by Christian Children's Fund. The Government's interest in vocational training and certification augurs well for the accreditation of these training programmes and their integration into the reorganised tertiary college in the future.

The Social Centre / UNICEF survey of quality

The survey⁷ undertaken by the Social Centre in 1998 aimed

- to establish a baseline for policy development and service improvement;
- to inform the understanding in each of the sectors and interest groups represented by the Council of the priorities for change;
- to provide a "snapshot" of the status of quality in a representative sample; and
- to inform the development of future standards and training for the sector as a whole.

The instrument used for the survey was the Early Childhood Environments Rating Scale (Revised). Developed by Harms, Clifford and Cryer at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Centre, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as an instrument for both research and programme improvement, the ECERS has been in use in a number of countries of the world for 15 years. Observers using the scale were trained by the Caribbean Child Development Centre, and the Centre undertook the data analysis and prepared the report for UNICEF and the Social Centre. Further details of the instrument are attached in *Appendix One*.

The 25% sample of the provision in the country was selected through a process of random stratification to represent the three main sector providers (private, church and Social Centre), rural and urban services, preschools and day care centres, special needs and variations in socio/economic status of user groups. The principal findings of the survey were as follows:

- 42% of centres were not exercising basic cleanliness precautions and 82% were not exercising proper safety precautions (in the supervision of children, use of safety and emergency procedures, maintenance of indoor and outdoor areas).
- 42% of the centres are overcrowded.
- A quarter of the centres is in need of essential repairs.
- For a third of the centres, supervision of children and in some cases, discipline, is not positive and children's learning and self-esteem are suffering.
- There is a lack of gross motor equipment, as well as lack of attention to gross motor development despite the space that centres have, especially outside, for gross motor activities.
- Over half of the Centres did not provide sufficient support and resources for the development of emergent literacy and numeracy, communication and language skills.
- One third of the centres lack expression of creativity in art.
- Lack of materials and resources for nature, science, drama, music and movement.
- No early childhood workers in the survey sample had both minimum education qualifications and access to professional training.
- The need to improve childcare practices: caring personal care routines, good nutrition, adequate rest periods, and appropriate toileting and cleanliness.
- The need for reform in working practices: staff working conditions; structures for staff communication and planning; development of supervisory and feedback structures; scheduling; and involvement of parents — three quarters of parents could be better informed of and involved in their child's activities and development.
- All centres (with the exception of one specialist centre) need to identify how to be accessible to children with

disabilities and be supported with training in their attempts to reach out to children who have previously not had access.

It must be noted that the emerging picture in Dominica is broadly similar to that in all the countries where surveys have been undertaken in the recent period⁸ — the need for better physical facilities and the need for improvement in the learning environments within the centres. However many of the desired changes do not require money. Rather they require greater awareness on the part of the service providers and the will to make the required changes. There are examples in each country where an improved service or aspect of a service is being provided and can serve as a model or training site for other providers. Just how important the desired changes are to is echoed in the conclusions and recommendations of report of the Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development (2000).

The Committee identified four overarching themes on which to base its conclusions and recommendations:

- All children are born wired for feelings and ready to learn
- Early environments matter and nurturing relationships are essential
- Society is changing and the needs of young children are not being addressed
- Interactions among early childhood science, policy, and practice are problematic and demand dramatic rethinking

In its conclusions, the ***Committee noted the striking disparities in what children know and can do in early childhood are strongly associated with social and economic circumstances, and are predictive of subsequent academic performance. Redressing these disparities is one essential national strategy.*** Another, is the limitation and reversal of the damage caused by social and emotional impairments caused by disorganisation in response to trauma. These conclusions are very pertinent for the Dominica population.

In relation to the environments in which children are raised, the Committee noted the following conclusions:

- Parents and other regular caregivers in children's lives are "active ingredients" of environmental influence during the early childhood period. Without one such relationship, development is disrupted. However, if provided, a sensitive care-giving relationship can foster remarkable recovery
- Children's early development depends on the health and well being of their parents. Yet the daily experience of significant numbers of children is burdened by family stress.
- Out-of-home relationships for children are significant. Those who care for them must be esteemed and compensated adequately as a means of supporting stability and quality in those relationships, regardless of their family's income and irrespective of their developmental needs.
- Evidence is overwhelming on the environmental threats to the developing central nervous system posed by drug exposures, chronic stress, abuse and neglect.

These conclusions reinforce the arguments that early childhood advocates have mounted. The importance of the need for supports to parents to be combined with the supports required for caregivers and teachers. The need for appropriate training for staff and remuneration is stressed. In Dominica, no early childhood workers in the survey sample had both minimum education qualifications and access to professional training.

Development depends on childcare that is safe. In Dominica, there are safety concerns in 82% of the centres in the survey sample, and overcrowding concerns in 42%. Development also depends on opportunities provided for nurturing and stable relationships. The survey revealed that in a third of the centres, supervision of children and in some cases, discipline, is not positive and children's learning and self-esteem are suffering. Critically, development depends on the provision of linguistically and cognitively rich environments. The survey findings indicated that over half of the Centres did not provide sufficient support and resources or the development of emergent literacy and numeracy, communication and language skills.

It is useful to reflect on the Committee's findings about successful interventions in early childhood provision. Model early childhood programmes that deliver carefully designed interventions with well-defined objectives and that include well designed evaluations have been shown to influence the developmental trajectories of children whose life course is threatened by socioeconomic disadvantage, family disruption and diagnosed disabilities. The greatest impact is felt within programmes that combine child focused educational activities with explicit attention to parent child interaction patterns and relationship building. Interventions that work are rarely simple, inexpensive or easy to implement. ***However, the critical agenda for early childhood intervention is to advance understanding of what it takes to improve the odds of positive outcomes for the nation's most vulnerable young children and to determine the most cost effective strategies for achieving well defined goals.*** This critical agenda echoes that of the recommendations in the survey in Dominica; many of the desired

changes recommended require awareness on the part of the caregivers and service providers and the will to make the required changes. It is the major challenge before the Council for Pre-primary Education to determine how to take the survey recommendations forward.

A critical agenda facing the Council

The usefulness of a survey such as that undertaken in Dominica is that it enables thoughtful consideration and decision making based on tangible evidence. Council members were surprised at the number of instances of failure to provide care for, and attention to, children. One of the principle recommendations of the survey was for initiatives (in the context of on going training, talks, workshops and monitoring visits) to provide a "climate change" in the sector. Another was to reinforce training already provided in areas in which staff did not seem sufficiently sensitised to the value of certain early childhood interventions. The lack of art, creative expression, physical movement and fun in learning were dismal findings. The need for reinforcing strategies for parental involvement, scheduling and use of play as a medium for learning and for providing access for children with disabilities are also priorities.

The Council is in a position to provide collective leadership in these climate change areas; but it faces its own constraints in capacity which need to be dealt with as a priority. A proposal for the establishment of a professional Early Childhood Development Services Unit to support and implement the decisions of the Council has been drafted. It demonstrates how the Government intends to operate over a defined period its partnership with service providers in the establishment of a regulatory system for early childhood. The Unit will be responsible for ensuring that further proposals of a technical nature are taken forward such as those for the development of a system for certification of early childhood staff in the new tertiary college; a premises improvement plan for external donor funding to improve centres and the conditions in which staff work on a case by case basis, commencing with the estimated 25% in need of critical structural repair and the 92% requiring materials and equipment; the construction of a system for prioritising the most needy centres for government subvention in order to reduce overcrowding (where the current practice is to take in numbers of children to boost fee income) and to promote access by the poorest and most vulnerable children.

An important recommendation arising from the survey to support emergent literacy and communication skills, and to support numeracy, is to devise a project intervention that in the first instance prioritises those centres giving rise for concern in the survey. With the assistance of a specialist with a small team of existing practitioners, intensive support would be provided in centres requiring demonstration of effective strategies. Training would be developed as a result of the learning arising, with a system for monitoring which can be used in follow up activities. This proposed intervention could be funded externally as a discrete project which leaves in its wake useful materials and methodologies to used in the sector as a whole.

The Council's role under the Education Act is to be accountable for actions taken to regulate and support sector development. Hard choices have to be made about the priorities for work so that the momentum of, or the support for, initiatives can be sustained. Political and senior officer support for the Council has been consistent. But the resources are not as yet forthcoming. Council members have full time commitments in the early childhood sector and beyond. The establishment of the development team envisaged in the proposal for the Early Childhood Development Services Unit is critical to the success of the Council as an entity. The challenge for Dominica is not only to identify the new resources required but to consider carefully the potential for reallocation of current resources to support the early childhood sector. Primary school rolls are falling, releasing resources within that sector for potential reallocation. Restructuring of the roles of supervisory and support staff within the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology will be completed shortly, potentially increasing capacity for support to the sector. The tertiary sector is being restructured to make more effective use of resources, which will be extremely important for the support and development of training in the sector.

The Council is proving to be an indispensable mechanism and forum for consultation, social mobilisation and participation of health, day care, special needs and pre-school providers. The participation of each member has proved to be invaluable for the development of a comprehensive vision of and plan for the sector as a whole. The survey and its findings have provided a useful basis for building coalitions, as potential partners respond more positively to objective data rather than to opinions and feelings. The experience in Dominica reflects that in the region as a whole, where the scale and number of tasks involved in beginning the process of government led regulation, policy development and sectoral change in a fragmented sector cannot be underestimated. Attempting to do too much at one time is a sure recipe for frustration.⁹ The experience thus far has indicated that small steps forward, taken at a pace that is manageable, can achieve goals that are sustainable.

APPENDIX ONE

Choice of instrument for the survey

The choice of the Early Childhood Environments Rating Scale (ECERS) Revised Edition (1998) for the survey was proposed for three reasons:

- Developed by Harms, Clifford and Cryer at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Centre, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as an instrument for both research and programme improvement, the ECERS has been in use in a number of countries of the world for 15 years. In its revised form (ECERS-R) it reflects the changes in the early childhood field that have occurred over the period from 1980 and incorporates advances in the understanding of how to measure quality. The emphasis on family concerns, individual children's needs, inclusion of all children including those with disabilities and cultural diversity reflect the changes in thinking in early childhood development in that period. Levels of programme quality in the ECERS-R scale are based on current definitions of best practice and on research relating practice to child outcomes.
- During the years in which it has been used, numerous research projects have discovered significant relationships between ECERS scores and child outcome measures, and between ECERS scores and teacher characteristics and behaviours. Although the basic scale remained the same in each country and culture in which it is used, some changes were required in a few indicators (and especially in the examples given to illustrate the indicators) to make the scale relevant to the situation and to the cultures of the countries in which it is used. Each item in the ECERS-R is expressed as a 7-point scale with descriptors for 1 (inadequate), 3 (minimal), 5 (good) and 7 (excellent). Extensive field tests using the revised instrument resulted in a percentage agreement across the full 470 indicators in the scale of 86.1%. **The ECERS has been shown to have good predictive validity and the revised form would be expected to maintain that form of reliability.**
- The ECERS-R is designed to be used by persons who are familiar with early childhood environments and who are experienced observers. Based on observations, observers are required to mark "yes" or "no" against a series of statements describing what they have seen. There is scope for questions to be raised with staff at the conclusion of the observation in order to clarify ambiguities and to explore why some things were not seen at the particular time of the observation. The observers are not required (or enabled) to interpret what they have seen or to give it a value. Local teams of two to three observers, trained in the use of the scale and invited to participate in making the changes necessary to adjust for the local situation and cultural relevance (such as identifying the local names and descriptions for toys and activities), can easily administer the scale over 2 to 4 hours in each setting depending on its schedule. (*In Dominica, the team also collected data on administrative records and systems which considerably lengthened the time of the survey visits, which in some centres, took place over a whole school day*). The teams are required to consult each other on what is observed and to reach agreement. Levels of inter-rater agreement are generally high.

Footnotes

1 National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods. The Science of Early Childhood Development* National Academy Press, Washington, D.C.

2 UNICEF (1996) *The Economics of Child Poverty*, Caribbean Area Office, Bridgetown, Barbados

3 Van de Gaag, J (1996) *Early Childhood Development. Investing in the Future*, World Bank, Washington

4 Undertaken by the Faculty of Social Sciences and the School of Continuing Studies in 1994, a qualitative assessment was undertaken of the rearing of boy children in six Caribbean communities in Guyana, Dominica and Jamaica (Brown and Chevannes, 1995, *The Gender Socialisation Project Reports*, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica)

5 UNICEF Caribbean Area Office/CARICOM (1997) *The Caribbean Plan of Action for Early Childhood Care, Education and Development*, CARICOM Human Resource Development Strategy 1997-2002, UNICEF Caribbean Area Office, Bridgetown, Barbados and CARICOM Georgetown, Guyana. The Plan was drafted by the Caribbean Child Development Centre, School of Continuing Studies, University of the West Indies.

6 Charles, L (2000) *The implementation of the Caribbean Plan of Action. Report to the Third Regional Conference on Early Childhood*. UNICEF CAO, Barbados and Ministry of Education, Jamaica. Data were drawn from individual country reports prepared in 1999 for *the Education For All: Assessment 2000* process in the region

7 Social Centre, Dominica/UNICEF CAO (2000) *Quality in Early Childhood Centres. A report on the survey of 24 early childhood centres in the Commonwealth of Dominica*. Prepared by Sian Williams, Caribbean Child Development Centre, University of the West Indies based on the work of the observation team from the Social Centre, Viella Bruney, Denise Defoe and Norma Cyrille.

8 Grenada (1999), St. Vincent and the Grenadines (2000) and Jamaica (1995 in pre-primary schools, 2000 in Grade One classes). Suriname will report formally in 2001.

9 Charles, L (2000) op. cit.

URL <http://www.uwichill.edu.bb/bnccde/dominica/conference/papers/Williams.html>

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