# Early Childhood Matters Transitions in the early years: A learning opportunity Bernard van Leer Foundation

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Bernard van Leer Foundation PO Box 82334 2508 EH The Hague The Netherlands

Tel: +31 (0)70 331 2200 Fax: +31 (0)70 350 2373 email: registry@bvleerf.nl

<www.bernardvanleer.org>

Series editors: Teresa Moreno, Jan van Dongen Design & production: Homemade Cookies

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### **Editorial**

This edition of Early Childhood Matters is on 'transitions': the physical, social and developmental threshholds that children cross from their home environment into their first experiences of life outside – daycare, pre-school and school. "Successful transitions: the continuum from home to school" is one of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's three new programme areas, launched earlier this year. The goals of our interventions in this area include the enhancement of the quality of children's learning environments and a better availability of and demand for early education.

Entering school is one of the most significant events in a child's life, and the results of and experience in the first years of education have farreaching consequences. The Foundation looks to a spectrum of actors, including parents, caregivers, childminders, teachers and peers, in helping to make the transition from home to school a valuable experience for each child, both in terms of their current quality of life and their future prospects. A summary of the framework that we have developed to guide our work in this area is presented on page 23.

The following pages present a variety of ideas and perspectives and a number of practical examples in different contexts. While they all differ in approach, their common denominator is, as John Bennett puts it in our interview with him (see page 13): "Young children desire to move forward and the challenge of transition can be highly motivating for them. For this reason, we must see transition not as a problem but a challenge."

The issue of transition is intrinsically linked to education. UNESCO's *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007* (published in October 2006) emphasises the importance of enhancing early childhood education. It covers in a substantive way the transition period of young children from their early childhood experiences and home environments to primary schooling. A summary of the report can be found on page 5.

Early childhood programmes contribute to realising children's rights especially in ensuring access to education for every child and integrating educational activities with other services that implement rights on other fronts such as health, birth registration and protection. An example of this approach is presented in the "Parques Infantis" programme (see page 45).

A large proportion of young children around the world enter schools being taught in a foreign language or dialect. The difficulties of learning to read and write within the first years of primary school, especially in a foreign language, contribute significantly to the large numbers of children who drop out within the first years of school or who repeat grades. However, (formal) education is generally structured around national interests and the desire of parents to introduce dominant languages that allow for social mobility.

APEDIBIMI in Guatemala (see page 38) and ABEK in Uganda (page 36) illustrate how respecting the local culture, learning the mainstream language and involving parents and the community in educational activities have led to a better transition of children into school, resulting in a significant drop in school dropout rates.

But schools also have a responsibility to meet children halfway. Better communication and interaction between pre-schools, primary schools and parents would help greatly to facilitate transitions. This is the point of departure in the Mississippi Delta Children's Partnership (see page 29), and the dilemma around this issue is also outlined in "Formalise the informal, or 'informalise' the formal: Toward more child-friendly schools" on page 20.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (art. 28 and 29) states that children have a right to education and inclusion regardless of developmental status. In practice, however, setting 'readiness' standards can mean that children who don't fit the standard are excluded. An example of how to tackle this



Entering school is one of the most significant events in a child's life, and children's experience in the first years of education have far-reaching consequences

challenge is shown by the Israel Centre for Learning Competence (see page 49).

Access to good early education outside the family is the first step of transitions. However, if quality of education is not good enough, children can be pushed out or leave of their own, draining scarce resources needed for human development. By introducing this topic in this ECM, we hope that future 'transitions' increasingly respect the rights of children and address the imperative for human and social development.

Editors: Teresa Moreno and Jan van Dongen

## The Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007

The Education for All Global Monitoring Reports assess the progress achieved by countries in realising their commitments to provide education to children, youth and adults. Developed by an independent team and published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the reports identify needed policy reforms and best practice in key areas relating to education, draw attention to emerging challenges in education and seek to promote international cooperation in favour of education. They contain abundant country-specific data to illustrate their analyses.

The Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007, "Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education", the fifth report in the annual series, focuses on encouraging countries and the international community to enhance early childhood care and education, giving special attention to equity and inclusion.

Because it adopts a comprehensive approach and insists that learning begins before a child walks through the classroom door, the new report naturally addresses in a substantive way the transition of young children from their early childhood experiences and home environments to primary schooling, the theme of this issue of Early Childhood Matters.<sup>1</sup> The following is a summary of the contents of the report, which was launched on 26 October 2006.

#### Learning begins at birth

Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007 examines the progress towards the achievement of the six Education for All (EFA) goals (see the box). The goals focus on the need to provide learning opportunities from infancy to adulthood and reflect a comprehensive perspective on education.

The *Global Monitoring Report 2007* focuses on the first of the six EFA goals, which calls upon countries to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education (ECCE).

The report relies on a holistic definition of ECCE: ECCE supports children's survival, growth, learning and cognitive, social, physical and emotional development from birth to entry into primary school. ECCE is a right recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is also an instrument for guaranteeing other rights of children.

Early childhood programmes are crucial to ensuring children's proper development, and they are vital in the establishment of routes out of social and economic disadvantage. They can improve the wellbeing of young children in the developing world, where a child has a four in ten chance of living in extreme poverty, and 10.5 million children die each year before age 5 because of preventable diseases. The programmes can thereby promote reductions in extreme poverty and hunger, the overarching objective of the Millennium Development Goals.

#### **Progress towards the six EFA goals**

With a 2015 horizon for achieving the EFA goals, urgent and comprehensive action is needed, particularly in identifying and enrolling hard-to-reach children and making a dent in the literacy challenge.

Pre-primary education is being implemented only slowly

In 2004, almost 124 million children worldwide were enrolled in programmes that, in addition to providing care, offered structured learning activities in formal or non-formal settings. This represented a rise of 10.7 percent over the figure in 1999. Increases were especially pronounced (a little over 40 percent) in sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and South and West Asia. In most other regions, the climb was

modest, and, in East Asia, enrolments declined by almost 10 percent, mainly due to trends in China. Around 48 percent of the world's pre-primary entrants were girls, a proportion unchanged since 1999.

The global pre-primary gross enrolment ratio rose from 33 to 37 percent. There were substantial increases in the Pacific and the Caribbean and much smaller increases elsewhere. The gross enrolment ratio for East Asia was stable. A large enrolment

increase in sub-Saharan Africa was not matched by a similar rise in the gross enrolment ratio because of high population growth.

Primary education continues to expand The world net enrolment ratio stands at 86 percent. Primary school enrolments grew the most between 1999 and 2004 in two of the three regions with the lowest level of attainment in universal primary education: by 27 percent in sub-Saharan Africa and

#### Education for All, the Dakar Framework and the Millennium Development Goals

Building on two United Nations instruments, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the international community adopted the World Declaration on Education for All, at Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. At the heart of the declaration, which was agreed to by delegates from 155 countries, is the recognition that universal education is the key to sustainable development and social justice.

The 2000 Dakar Framework for Action, approved by over 160 countries meeting at the World Education Forum, in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, expresses the international community's commitment to a broad-based strategy for ensuring that the basic learning needs of every child, youth and adult are met within a generation and sustained thereafter. It sets the six EFA goals, as follows:

- 1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children
- 2. Ensuring that, by 2015, all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and ethnic-minority children, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- 3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.

- 4. Achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially among women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
- 5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring the full and equal access of girls to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
- 6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

The Millennium Development Goals, which were approved by world leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, form an agenda for reducing poverty and improving lives. For each goal, one or more targets has been set, most for 2015. The first goal cannot be achieved without education, and two other goals make explicit reference to education, as follows:

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education. (Target: ensure that, by 2015, boys and girls everywhere will be able to complete a full course of good-quality primary schooling.) Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. (Target: eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and at all levels of education by 2015.)

by 19 percent in South and West Asia, but only by 6 percent in the Arab States.

While grade 1 enrolments rose sharply, major challenges remain. Too many children who start school do not reach the last primary grade: fewer than 83 percent of children reach the last grade in half the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean for which data are available, while fewer than two thirds do so in half the countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

#### Out-of-school children

Progress is being made in reducing the number of primary-school-age children who are not enrolled in school. Between 1999 and 2004, the number fell by around 21 million, to 77 million. This is still unacceptably high, however. Sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia are home to more than three quarters of these children, although the number in South and West Asia was halved between 1999 and 2004, mainly due to reductions in India. The global estimate, though high, understates the problem: household survey data show that many children enrolled in school do not attend regularly.

The children most likely to be out of school and to drop out live in rural areas and come from the poorest households. Girls are more likely than boys to be out of school. On average, a child whose mother has no education is twice as likely to be out of school as one whose mother has some education.

### Growing demand for secondary education, but insufficient places

Gross enrolment ratios in secondary education climbed in all developing regions, but remain low in sub-Saharan Africa (30 percent), South and West Asia (51 percent) and the Arab States (66 percent). Low numbers of secondary places slow the achievement of universal primary education because this reduces the incentive to complete primary school. At the same time, increasing demand for secondary education results in competition with other levels for public expenditure.

*Gender parity is not yet a reality*At the pre-primary level, the ratio of gross

enrolments among girls relative to those among boys rose slightly, from 0.96 to 0.97. Indeed, the ratio is higher at the pre-primary level than it is at the primary level (see below), probably because pre-primary enrolment ratios are relatively low and tend to reflect education mainly among the more affluent. Gender differences are usually less pronounced among this group than they are among the poor.

Worldwide, there are now 94 girls in primary school for every 100 boys, up from 92 per 100 in 1999. Of the 181 countries for which data are available up to 2004, about two thirds have achieved gender parity in primary education. The primary education gender gap in favour of boys has closed in only four of the 26 countries that had gross enrolment ratios below 90 in 2000.

Gender equality also remains an issue; stereotypes persist in learning materials, and, too often, the expectations of teachers differ with respect to girls and boys.

#### Literacy is an elusive target

Little progress has been made in achieving universal literacy. Some 781 million adults (one in five worldwide) lack minimum literacy skills. Two-thirds of these people are women. Literacy rates are low in South and West Asia (59 percent), sub-Saharan Africa (61 percent), the Arab States (66 percent) and the Caribbean (70 percent). Without concerted efforts to expand adult literacy programmes, the number of adult illiterates will have dropped by only 100 million by 2015.

### Tackling exclusion: lessons from country experiences

Education for All requires an inclusive approach. Governments should identify the groups of children most likely never to enrol in school or to drop out. This is the first step in implementing policies to reach out to the excluded, overcome the barriers that deprive marginalised groups of learning opportunities and improve the quality and relevance of education.

Among measures to foster inclusion are the abolishment of school fees, the provision of income support and other financial incentives to poor households to reduce their reliance on child labour,

teaching in mother tongues, offering educational opportunities for disabled children, designing specific programmes for children affected by HIV/AIDS and ensuring that youth and adults get a second chance at education, including through non-formal programmes. Armed conflict and internal displacements require urgent interventions offering basic education services and medical and psychological care.

School fees have been reduced or abolished in several countries, but are still too common. This is a major obstacle to the participation of the poor in primary schooling.

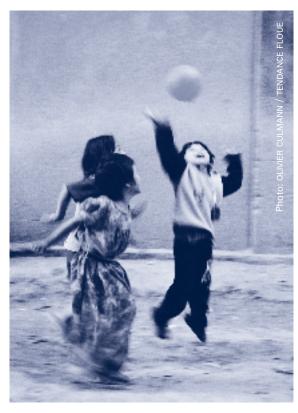
Countries need sound education plans to overcome exclusion and improve education quality. Adequate public spending, expansion in secondary education and the hiring of trained and motivated teachers are three key aspects of such plans.

While the overall trend in public education spending is positive (increases of more than 30 percent in 20 countries), spending as a percentage of gross national product fell between 1999 and 2004 in 41 of the 106 countries for which data are available, though it increased in most of the others. Spending dropped appreciably in Latin America and the Caribbean and in South and West Asia. Public spending should focus on key areas for achieving EFA, including ECCE, inclusive education and adult literacy.

The EFA goals cannot be achieved without training new teachers. Sub-Saharan Africa needs to recruit between 2.4 million and 4 million teachers. In sub-Saharan Africa and in South and West Asia, there are too few women teachers to attract girls to enter and remain in school. Teacher absenteeism is a problem in many developing countries. Shorter pre-service training, more on-the-job practice, more professional development and financial incentives are effective strategies for retaining teachers in remote areas and other difficult teaching environments.

#### International support: making better use of aid

Donors and governments have begun to adopt new approaches to raising the effectiveness of aid. The Fast-Track Initiative was established in



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2002 to promote a global compact that would lead to the development of credible education-sector plans and to greater and more predictable external financial support. The initiative has become an important mechanism for dialogue among donors. However, there is still no global compact for achieving universal primary education. Since 2002, disbursements have totalled USD 96 million, but have only reached ten countries, though donors have increased their pledges significantly since 2005.

Leaders at the G8 Summit in St Petersburg in 2006 affirmed the fundamental importance of EFA as a contributor to national development and peace. Nonetheless, the external funding requirements for EFA, including provision for ECCE and adult literacy, are estimated at USD 11 billion a year, over three times the current spending.

Basic education benefited from an increase in overall donor aid to education between 2000 and 2004. Including funds channelled as direct budget support, aid to basic education for all low-income countries almost doubled, rising from USD 1.8 billion to USD 3.4 billion. This represented a steady share of roughly 55 percent of donor aid to the entire education sector in low-income countries over the period.

However, the flows of aid for basic education will be inadequate if the current share in total aid and the distribution across income groups are maintained. Of their total aid in 2003-2004, multilateral donors allocated 11.8 percent to education. Half of all bilateral donors allocate at least half of their education aid to middle-income developing countries. Almost half allocate less than one quarter directly to basic education. The share of total aid going to basic education must at least double and become more focused on low-income countries. Greater efforts will be needed to persuade donors to boost the volume and predictability of aid and to encourage the governments of low-income countries to assign priority to basic education.

#### The compelling case for ECCE

There is a strong case for public and private intervention. Well-designed ECCE programmes may complement the care children receive at home, significantly enhance children's well-being in the formative years and positively affect the future course of children's lives. Programmes that combine nutrition, healthcare, childcare and education have a positive impact on cognitive outcomes.

Learning begins before a child ever walks through a classroom door; participation in ECCE therefore also facilitates primary school enrolments and favours success in the first years of school. From an economic viewpoint, investment in early childhood programmes offers a payoff in terms of human capital. Early childhood programmes may reduce social inequality, and they may compensate for the vulnerability and disadvantage resulting from poverty and discrimination due to gender, race, ethnicity, caste, or religion.

#### Worldwide progress in ECCE

Enrolment in pre-primary education has tripled worldwide since 1970, and the environment in which care and education are provided to young children has been rapidly evolving, too. Households are smaller; there are more working women, and new gender roles are emerging. About 80 percent of developing countries now have some sort of formally established maternity leave, although enforcement varies.

Meanwhile, the evidence suggests that the young children in the greatest need who are also most likely to benefit - those most exposed to malnutrition and preventable diseases, for example - are the least likely to be enrolled in pre-primary programmes. Though pre-primary gross enrolment ratios are rapidly improving in Latin America and the Caribbean and in the Pacific, they remain low in most of the rest of the developing world, but especially in sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab States. Almost half the countries in the world have no formal programmes addressing the diverse needs in the health, nutrition, care and education of children 3 or under. Everywhere, children from poorer, rural households and children who are socially excluded (because they lack birth certificates, because their parents are uneducated, or because they belong to an ethnic minority, for instance) have less access to ECCE programmes than do children from more well off urban households.

Most developed countries in the West offer at least two years of free pre-primary education. Highly trained professionals are assisted by childcare workers and part-time volunteers. Elsewhere, many countries have implemented policies to expand and upgrade the ECCE workforce, but progress is uneven. In developing countries, ECCE staff typically possess inadequate education and training and tend to be poorly remunerated.

Most ECCE provision occurs through the public sector in developed and transition countries and in Latin America. The private sector is prominent in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States, the Caribbean and East Asia. Few countries have established a national framework to coordinate ECCE programmes. Governments accord relatively low priority to spending on pre-primary education, and ECCE is not a priority among most donor agencies. In nearly all agencies, the allocation for pre-primary education is less than 10 percent of the allocation for primary education, and, in over half the agencies, the allocation is less than 2 percent of this sum.

#### **Effective ECCE programmes: the transition**

Successful early childhood programmes typically help ensure children's proper development by supporting and complementing the efforts of parents and other carers during the earliest years of the lives of the children, integrating educational activities with other services, notably healthcare, childcare and nutrition, and easing the transition as the children move from their families to programmes outside the home and eventually into primary schools.

Working with families and communities One way to smooth the transition between home and school is by engaging with parents. Parents or other custodial carers outside the basic education system are the child's first educators, and, for the youngest age group, the home is the primary arena of care.

The past decade has seen an increase in the number of parenting programmes that are aimed at children 3 or under. Home-visiting programmes supply assistance to individual parents. Their help is generally positive, especially among at-risk families, because they usually focus on child development and raising the self-esteem of parents.

Local communities also play a key role in supporting young children and their families through home- or community-based childcare.

Centre-based early childhood programmes The most common form of ECCE is centre-based provision, including pre-schools, for children from age 3 to school entry. Approaches that combine nutrition, healthcare, childcare and education are more effective in improving young children's wellbeing and development.

Centre-based programmes require pedagogies that take into account the specificity of children's development and the social context within which children live. Inclusive programmes build on traditional childcare practices, are suited to the ages of the children, accommodate children's diverse experiences and cultural backgrounds and seek to involve children who have special needs.

Early learning is most effective if it is imparted in the mother tongue of the children, though teaching in official languages remains the norm.

Programmes should address the circumstances of children who are disabled or who have been affected by armed conflict. The first exposure to organised teaching also represents an opportunity to challenge traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes through appropriately designed programmes.

Research shows that the single most important predictor of children's enhanced well-being and, therefore, of ECCE quality is interaction between children and staff and the extent of focus on the needs of the child. Adequate interaction requires reasonable working conditions, including low staff-children ratios and appropriate programme materials.

Easing the transition to primary school ECCE of good quality is an end in itself, but it also represents a foundation for subsequent education. It is thus important to foster continuity between ECCE programmes and primary schooling. Continuity in parental involvement, staffing and curricula smoothes the transition of young children from their early childhood experiences and home and pre-primary environments to the primary education system. Steps to facilitate this transition need to be supported so that dropout rates, which are extremely high in developing countries, may be reduced, but also to help children equip themselves with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to realise themselves to their fullest personal potential, to interact effectively with the world and to become good citizens able to contribute to society.

Several countries have been integrating ECCE closely with the education system so as to ease the transition to primary school. These efforts may be described according to two main approaches: making children ready for primary school ('school readiness') and adapting primary schools to young children ('ready schools').

The school readiness approach stresses the importance of ECCE in promoting children's development and assuring that children are prepared to enter formal schooling. It seeks to identify the characteristics that children should display when they enter primary school so that they have a good chance of succeeding.

In addition to being positively associated with participation in pre-primary programmes and exposure to transition activities, school readiness is influenced by family income, the language spoken at home, the education attainment of parents and the size of the household. Differences between public and private pre-schools and urban and rural residence are also important.

There seems to be a consensus among researchers that *school readiness* encompasses development in five areas in which children differ greatly:

- physical well-being and motor development (measured in terms of health and growth);
- social and emotional development (ability to control one's own behaviour, ability to play and work with other children);
- approach to learning (enthusiasm, curiosity, persistence and temperament);
- language development (vocabulary, grammar and ability to learn and communicate);
- cognitive development and general knowledge (cognitive and problem-solving skills such as learning to observe and to note similarities and differences).

The concept of *ready schools*, meanwhile, focuses on the characteristics of a school environment that might facilitate or hinder learning. Researchers have identified several factors that may undermine readiness. Among these are overcrowded classrooms, the language gap (the language of instruction differs from the children's mother tongue), an absence of qualified, experienced first-grade teachers and inadequate learning materials. Addressing these issues has been particularly challenging in developing countries.

The relative importance of school readiness and ready schools is much debated. In any case, few programmes and few schools focus on the transition, and the relevant efforts of programmes and schools that do address the transition are usually part of more comprehensive initiatives, making it difficult to isolate and assess their specific impact.

Nonetheless, it is seems clear that, to be more effective, early childhood and pre-primary services should reflect an awareness of the value

of integrating ECCE with primary education, establishing continuity in pre-primary and primary curricula and between home and school and carrying out special activities aimed at easing the entry into primary school by disadvantaged children who have not benefited from ECCE programmes.

#### Fostering strong ECCE policies

The broad scope of ECCE is captured in the policy objectives associated with it around the world:

- providing healthcare, immunisation, feeding and nutrition;
- supporting parents through information-sharing and parenting education;
- creating a safe environment so young children may play and socialise with their peers;
- compensating for disadvantage and fostering the resilience of vulnerable children;
- promoting school readiness and preparing children for primary school;
- providing custodial care for children of working parents and for other family members;
- strengthening communities and social cohesion.

In general, government policies typically focus on promoting school readiness by preparing children for primary school. There is much less emphasis on programmes for children 3 or under and on programmes aimed at achieving other EFA goals.

A more favourable policy environment for ECCE is therefore necessary. Although governments must face many difficulties in expanding and improving ECCE programmes, they may help shape this environment by ensuring that there are adequate resources, including public funding. Dedicated government partnerships with the private sector and international organisations or aid agencies may generate resources for important projects that may then be taken to scale.

Governments may also play an important role by designing sound policies. Effective national policies for early childhood carry benefits for an education system. The endorsement of government leaders would help place ECCE on the policy agenda. A consultative process might be instituted for the development of a national ECCE policy

for children from birth to age 8, specifying the administrative responsibilities and budgetary commitments across relevant sectors and levels of government.

Policies should address all six EFA goals by confronting the barriers to education, including educational deficiencies in rural areas, the shortage of trained staff and secondary schools and the lack of adult literacy programmes. Early childhood provision and aggressive, targeted education policies should become an integral component of poverty reduction strategies. Aligning ECCE policies with other national and sectoral development policies would allow resources to be leveraged. ECCE might be included in key government resource documents, such as national budgets, sectoral plans and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers.

Even in a context of limited public resources, much may be done. A lead administrative body might be identified, and interagency mechanisms for decision making might be established. Public and private programmes might be monitored for quality. Public campaigns might promote ECCE, provide information to carers, help recruit teachers and encourage efforts to reach disadvantaged children and other children with limited access to ECCE. Guidelines and minimum standards on management, quality and financing might be defined and distributed. Coordination might be fostered among sectors and stakeholders so as to encourage public support. Eventually, a system for ongoing nationwide data collection to assess needs and outcomes might be organised.

#### **EFA** action now

Only nine years remain before 2015, the target year for achieving the EFA goals. Despite the progress in primary education, including among girls, too many children are still not in school, drop out, or do not acquire minimum skills. By neglecting the connections among early childhood, primary and secondary education and adult literacy, countries are missing opportunities to improve basic education, and, in the process, the prospects of children, youth and adults are suffering.

Nine recommendations warrant urgent policy attention:

- 1. Return to the comprehensive approach of the Dakar Framework for Action.
- Act with urgency to enrol all children in school, expand adult literacy programmes and create opportunities for children in conflict and postconflict situations.
- 3. Emphasise equity and inclusion.
- 4. Increase public spending and focus public spending more effectively.
- 5. Increase aid to basic education and allocate aid where it is most needed.
- 6. Move ECCE up domestic and international agendas.
- 7. Increase public financing for ECCE and target public financing more effectively.
- 8. Upgrade ECCE staff, especially in terms of qualifications, training and working conditions.
- 9. Improve the monitoring of ECCE.

The findings of the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007 remind us that there is no room for complacency. We have a collective responsibility to ensure quality education for all, a responsibility that begins by our providing strong foundations for children in the first years of life and on up to adulthood. Only through the adoption of a comprehensive approach that encompasses all the EFA goals and society's most fragile and vulnerable members might this mission be fulfilled.

#### Note

1. The Bernard van Leer Foundation contributed the following two background papers during the drafting of the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007*:

Arnold, C, Bartlett, K, Gowani, S and Merali, R (2006) "Is everybody ready?: Readiness, transition and continuity, reflections and moving forward."

Fabian, H and Dunlop, A-W (2006) "Outcomes of good practice in transition processes for children entering primary school."

These papers, in slightly modified form, will be published by the Bernard van Leer Foundation as Working Papers early 2007.

## "We must learn to use the transitions in children's lives far more positively"

### An interview with John Bennett

John Bennett has coordinated the Starting Strong reviews by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of early childhood care and education over the past years. He now works as a freelance consultant. Here he talks to Early Childhood Matters about the Starting Strong reviews, with particular reference to transitions between home, pre-school and school.

ECM: You've spent much of the last decade looking at how early childhood education and care are handled in a number of OECD countries. To begin with, talk us through how that came about.

John Bennett: *Starting Strong* grew out of the OECD's work on lifelong learning in the mid-1990s, which identified early childhood education and care (ECEC) as the foundation stage of lifelong learning. As a result, we were authorised by the OECD's education committee in 1997 to invite countries to undertake comprehensive reviews of their policies, aided by OECD expert teams. We felt it was important to specify 'care' as well as education – a false distinction, in my view, but a common one – so that we were able to include services for the youngest children in all the countries we studied.

The first *Starting Strong* report was published in 2001 and covered 12 countries – 10 in Europe plus the USA and Australia. *Starting Strong II*, which was published in September 2006, looks at what has changed in those countries in the last five years, and also studies eight further OECD countries. It has been a major undertaking.

How did the countries you studied react to the publication of the first Starting Strong report in 2001? Has it led to any changes?

The reaction on the whole was very positive. Most countries welcomed an external evaluation of their

systems, and the report focussed more attention on policy and on the structuring of ECEC systems. It started a number of conversations about issues such as creating more coherent national ECEC systems, as in the Nordic countries, which have brought together 'child care' and 'early education' into seamless, integrated universal systems. In these countries, ECEC has become a cornerstone of progressive labour and education policies, and a guarantee, not only of a fair start in life for young children, but also of equality of opportunity for women.

At the same time, we also underlined the importance of quality - that is, it's not enough for governments simply to say, "This year we've provided money to create 3,000 more places and next year we'll create 8,000 more". Unless these places provide quality education and care for young children, they may actually do more harm than good. In other words, serious government investment in and a rigorous regulation of early childhood services are necessary. We also tried to clarify issues of the costs and benefits of early childhood care and education in terms that policy-makers and the public could relate to, for example, the economic benefits of freeing up mothers for the labour market, the greater efficiency in education systems that early childhood services can bring, and the right of parents - including fathers - to have time with their children in their early years through access to remunerated parental leave.

How do the different countries you studied measure up in this regard?

There tends to be a difference in emphasis between the Nordic countries and other countries, for example, the liberal economies. By and large the Nordic countries take the view that ECEC should not take place in a protected educational stream only but rather in the context of a broader social agenda. Following their example, we emphasised in the contextual chapter in the Starting Strong reports that early childhood systems should serve not only the central aim - the care, upbringing and education of young children - but should also include broad societal goals, such as social and family welfare (including parental leave); gender equality; civic participation, and the fight against child and family poverty.

Because of the benefits flowing from their ECEC systems, the Nordic countries tend to see ECEC as a public good - that is, that as society as a whole benefits from the investment, it is quite legitimate that public monies should be invested in the sector. We found that this was often a difficult message to get across in the liberal economies, where the wider dimensions of 'child care' are overlooked, and there is a tendency to view the care of young children as a private market transaction between parents and childcare providers. These countries tend to 'target' public financing only toward the lowest-income children, and often, this gesture makes little sense when countries continue year after year to produce ever greater numbers of families and children held back by poverty, or excluded in some way. It's wise policy to provide targeted and well-funded programmes but only if similar efforts are being made to reduce family and child poverty upstream, that is, through fiscal, social and labour policies that provide more equity and prevent poverty. The evidence suggests that the challenges of poverty reduction and failure in school run deeper than providing early childhood 'interventions'.

Have any unexpected benefits arisen from the Starting Strong work?

I think that Starting Strong work has contributed to the knowledge base of ECEC - not in terms of experimental research, but in making known what different countries outside the English-speaking sphere are doing. The project has given people a sense that child poverty is not a fatality (as it is sometimes viewed in the English-speaking economies), that high-quality, developmental programmes for the youngest children can be organised as an entitlement for all families, that ECEC staff can be trained to high levels and have decent working conditions and careers in the early childhood field.

Another thing that's been very encouraging is the building up of ECEC networks within and across countries. The reviews showed that there was often little contact between the different ministries in charge of young children, and for this reason, no common vision or project. We often found that early childhood coordinators in the different ministries were isolated and struggled against a perception that their work was - as the French say - the 'fifth wheel on the cart'. Working with other ministries and the main stakeholders in the early childhood field has given a greater volume and significance to the work of the administrators. We found that to make progress, you need to have a critical mass of people working together on early childhood within a country - as has taken place in the UK, for example, with the Sure Start initiative.

At the international level, we were able to support a network of ECEC coordinators in the ministries of the countries we studied, who have - since the reviews – been able to meet once or twice a year with each other to examine early childhood policy issues and initiatives. The Starting Strong process has played a helpful role in enabling early childhood professionals working at policy-making level to come together and to learn from and with each other and, as a result, to be able to argue their case more strongly.

As you know, the Bernard van Leer Foundation recently started working in issue areas, one of which is "Successful transitions: The continuum from home to school". What do you see as the most important issues here?

Well, I think that the title of your programme is a good one, in that you start with the home. A parent or parents are normally the main emotional anchors



The social pedagogy approach supports children to form a positive self-image as a creative, strong child; to be curious and investigative, and to develop thinking skills and a positive attitude towards learning

and points of reference for a child. If they can be involved in the transitions of their child in a positive way from the beginning, e.g., the transition of their child to the childcare centre, they can also provide the stability and the support that their children may need in later transitions. Parental support to children can be much reinforced by the centre, for example, by centre staff providing advice and information to parents, involving parents in their work, and establishing an atmosphere and ethic that ensure a welcome for every child.

A second direction that the Foundation initiative could give would be to view transitions more positively. Despite the bad press that transitions can be given, we noticed during the Starting Strong reviews that transition into school generally had a highly positive connotation for young children. Young children desire to move forward and the challenge of transition can be highly motivating for them. For this reason, we must see transition not as a problem but a challenge. I think that we must learn to use the transitions in children's lives far more positively, with greater insight into their potential, rather than seeing transitions as problematic for every child.

In terms of smoothing transitions from the early childhood centre to the school - an aspect of transition that the Starting Strong review focussed most on - much can be done to reinforce the astounding adaptability of young children. Again parents will have a key role, through talking issues through with their children, and through continuing their contacts with the primary school and the new teachers. In addition, the early education centres and schools must also play their role - by establishing institutional contacts well ahead of time, by bringing the 'graduating' children to visit the school in advance and by establishing or

strengthening contacts between the 'old' and 'new' teachers. The personal element is always critical with young children - in this instance, the continuity of companions and teachers. Children wish to move forward with their closest friend or friends, and this should be catered for as much as possible. Again, continuity of teachers is very reassuring for young children: in Denmark and Sweden for example the early childhood pedagogue or teacher moves forward from the kindergarten into the pre-school class, that is, the special class used in the Nordic countries (except Norway) to bridge the transition into primary school, which normally, in these countries, begins at 7 years.

The creation of this special class by the Nordic countries also points to the importance of institutional arrangements. A pre-school class is reassuring for young children, and makes the switch over to a greater focus on subject-based knowledge and the acquisition of literacy skills easier for children. Both an early childhood pedagogy and primary school approach are used throughout this year, and in Denmark, the class is shared by a kindergarten pedagogue and a teacher from the school.

Other countries do things differently. In countries adopting a pre-primary approach to early education - that is, organising early education not as a kindergarten (with a focus on play, socio-emotional development, and holistic project work) but like a junior school (age cohorts, high child-staff ratios, a focus on cognitive development and learning standards, relatively few parental inputs) - transition into school is normally not a difficulty. The preprimary approach offers a smooth path from the early childhood classroom to the primary classroom, as the curricula and routines of both are often closely aligned. In France, for example, continuity is ensured through the use of a bridging curriculum across the final year of the école maternelle and the first two years of primary school. In addition, teachers can freely - if the school director approves - move upwards with their classes into primary school.

However, one has the impression in this situation that the young children have never really had the experience of an appropriate early childhood pedagogy where they can learn self-regulation

at their own pace and follow their own learning paths. The similarity of the two milieus supports a smooth transition from pre-primary into primary, but not necessarily at a personal level. The wishes and fears of the individual child may not be taken into account in large classrooms focussed not on the individual child or the child's agency but on reaching early learning standards. How often does one come across young children not excited and thrilled by their progression into school, but anxious about whether they will be allowed to 'pass' into school! The situation is not improved in systems where primary school begins at 5 or even 4 years.

A theme we keep coming back to in this edition of Early Childhood Matters is the question of making schools ready for children. What, in your view, are the challenges primary schools face in making transitions successful?

Well, *Starting Strong I* made a clear recommendation for successful transitions by positing 'a strong and equal partnership' between the early childhood centre and the school. An equal partnership requires that early childhood pedagogy with its emphasis on the natural learning strategies of the child (play, personal investigation, active learning) should be respected and be reflected in the early classes of the primary school. Continuity in educational processes can be stressed in two ways: through bringing down the sequential educational processes of the primary school into early education, or more appropriately, bringing upwards the holistic and investigative approaches to learning, characteristic of the young child, into the junior classes of the primary school. In other words, schools may need to adapt a modified pedagogy in the first years of primary schooling.

The reality is, however, that the relationship between primary education and the early childhood sector is neither strong nor equal. Schools and early childhood centres tend not to interact with each other sufficiently, although strengthening relationships is perhaps the easier part to tackle - the more serious part of the challenge is making those relationships more equal, because ECEC tends to be viewed as the weaker partner. This needs to change, and the strengths of the early childhood sector recognised, such as the greater skills in involving

parents shown by early childhood personnel. In addition, traditional attitudes holding that 'real' educational work with children starts only in the primary school need to be challenged. The work accomplished in ECEC centres to support the health and well-being of children, their socialisation and early attitudes toward learning is equally valuable, and should be continued upward into school. We need also to introduce more consciously into the lower primary classes pedagogies more typical of the early childhood period, such as learning by doing, project work and group work.

At the same time, the holistic nature of the young child's learning should not be made an excuse to banish sequential learning or emergent literacy and numeracy from the early childhood centre. Young children have a deep desire to communicate and imitate. They take real pleasure from 'playwriting', trying to decode, and many other emergent literacy skills. Again, as with transitions, their pleasure in these activities and their innate drive to communicate and use what Reggio Emilia calls 'the hundred languages of children' needs to be nurtured, and channelled toward emergent literacy, while respecting the child's interests and autonomy. Likewise, young children are happy to know that knowledge acquisition can be sequential, that is, that they have actually made progress and know more this month than last. It's helpful too for early childhood pedagogues to have a good idea of sequential progress, although they will not force children to achieve a pre-specified level of knowledge and proficiency at a given age.

This brings us on to what you've written about the difference between the 'social pedagogy' approach to ECEC and the 'pre-primary' approach. Can you sketch the main differences between them?

The 'social pedagogy' approach is, broadly practised in the Nordic countries. Typically children start attending kindergarten from the age of a year to eighteen months, but they do not embark on more formal learning activities and preparation for school in any focussed sense until the age of 6 or 7. Play, group project work and a confidence in the child's natural learning strategies characterise the Nordic kindergarten. The pedagogy employed combines care, nurturing and education, an approach that is

expected to continue into school. There's a strong emphasis on inculcating democratic values and attitudes, such as respect for diversity, helpfulness toward others, and personal responsibility. Where language and literacy are concerned, there is little focus on formal decoding or phonics until the pre-school class (6-7 years) but the use of the '100 languages' (including rich oral expression) is a central part of the pedagogical programme. For example, children in Finland do not begin working on literacy in any formal sense until the age of 6 or 7, but by the age of 14 they lead the world in reading comprehension. By contrast, we have seen children in 'tighter' early education systems who seem to have lost their enthusiasm for reading shortly after they learn to decode – perhaps because they have been confronted with too much drilling too soon. But I say 'perhaps': we do not have enough research on this topic to come to firm conclusions, except that children from the Nordic countries who begin literacy and sequential type learning much later than children in Western Europe do not seem at a disadvantage in the later PISA (age 14) tests.

In the 'pre-primary' approach – which is prevalent in the English-speaking countries and also in France and much of the rest of Europe – early childhood education is seen more narrowly as a training ground for school. Child-to-teacher ratios are higher and formal learning and school-like discipline can begin as early as the age of 3. Because of the numbers involved, there is less opportunity for teachers to respond to individual needs, and perhaps for children to practise autonomy and personal responsibility.

You clearly favour the social pedagogy approach typified by the Nordic countries. What do you see as its advantages?

Yes, the Nordic systems seem to me to respect more the well-being and psychological needs of young children. They take a holistic approach to learning. Instead of focusing from a very early age on developing particular skills such as gymnastics, literacy, numeracy, or other skill, they aim for more open and general goals such as social competence, emotional development, meaning-making relevant for young children and participation. To my mind, the UNESCO report, *Learning: The treasure within*,

conducted by Jacques Delors and an international team of experts, sums up admirably what ECEC should be about. It puts forward four main aims of learning: learning to be; learning to do; learning to learn; and learning to live together. This is reflected in the social pedagogy approach – the curriculum supports children to form a positive self-image as a creative, strong child; to be curious and investigative, and to develop thinking skills and a positive attitude towards learning. Social skills and a sense of linkedness with others are also emphasised through group work, often using the language of rights from a very early age.

A problem with the pre-primary approach – at least for me – is that it tends to focus more on the school as the benchmark, rather than on the potential and interest of each child. Pre-schools in some countries have become junior schools focussing on meeting quantifiable learning goals. They are less concerned with encouraging young children to become autonomous and to contribute to their group. The pedagogical model is that of teachers deciding and directing activities and children conforming, whereas in the social pedagogy approach the children tend to choose and be supported in *their* activities. Children play a more active role, and democratic participation is actively encouraged.

You mean in terms of social capital and participation in democracy?

Yes, there's some concern at present in countries about apathy towards the democratic process. To my mind, apathy is not surprising when education systems encourage passiveness in children from an early age, and according to research within the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, do not involve children sufficiently in the civic life of the school. At kindergarten level, this is a pity, as young children are at a moment in life where basic attitudes toward others and toward society are being formed. In a well-run kindergarten, a strong focus will be maintained on how children live their lives in the centre, on their well-being and attitudes, and not just on external learning standards. Young children love to participate and to learn through play, personal investigation and freely chosen group work. These aptitudes can be nurtured by appropriate pedagogies and curricula,

which provide young children with opportunities to choose, negotiate and participate. Peter Moss in a recent book also talks about the importance of the ECEC centre as a focal point for democratic participation and decision-making: bringing parents and people from all sectors of a community together with teachers and local authorities to discuss questions about education, and what communities and societies want for their children.

How can policy-makers help to bring this situation about?

The line ministries can help people participate by practising consultation as much as possible. The practice corresponds to modern modes of management - to consult, disseminate information and provide funding and education to people to do things for themselves. In public institutions like the early childhood centre or the school, this will mean training directors to involve parents in all aspects of centre management and goal-setting. For example, a good opportunity is offered by new curricula in early childhood, whereby ministries, rather than imposing an expert-driven curriculum from the capital city, consult the major stakeholders across the country about how early childhood services should be conducted and what are their basic aims. In this way, ownership of the general curriculum plan and of centres is given back to the stakeholders, and the task of formulating a more detailed curriculum for each centre is entrusted to the teachers, parents and children involved. But this presupposes adequate training of teachers to take on this task and to involve parents at a deep level. Again the Nordic countries tend to be more advanced in this field than elsewhere in Europe, but interesting initiatives are also taking place in other parts of Europe. The US also tends to be strong in involving parents in the early childhood sector, and the laws in many states make this a requirement for publicly-funded programmes.

Finally, the OECD reviews you've coordinated have obviously dealt only with wealthier, more developed countries. Can you identify any lessons from this which developing countries should also bear in mind?

I'm not a great one for lessons, especially when one is dealing with the majority world. There are enough

insightful people in these countries to lead their own early childhood systems. All I would say is that if developing countries wish to use models from the developed world, it is good to choose models, based on respect for parents, social equity and appropriate pedagogies. It saddens me to see countries adopting pre-primary approaches emphasising 'readiness for school', rather than more egalitarian models focussing on the well-being and general development of young children, in association with their parents and communities.

Early childhood and primary school sectors in developing countries still follow many of the oppressive (for children) features of the older colonial models: competitive, elitist, narrowly 'educational' and divorced from the needs of the poorest children and communities. When the model is adopted to cater for large numbers, the situation of children can further deteriorate: impossible numbers of children per teacher, few materials and teaching resources, long distances to travel for many children. But the Foundation has much greater experience of these matters, and I'm sure, well-informed ideas about how to provide education using local community strengths in co-operation with the education authorities.

## Towards more child-friendly schools Formalise the informal, or informalise the formal

Sheldon Shaeffer, Director, UNESCO Bangkok Office<sup>1</sup>

The nature of pre-school education – what it is, what it 'looks like', what it is meant to 'do', and what role the government (especially the Ministry of Education) plays in promoting it – is one of the vexing problems facing today's educators. The relationship between pre-school and primary education is particularly problematic.

For example, in one small, well-developed island nation, children in the last few weeks of at least one state kindergarten are no longer allowed naps and are given heavy bags to carry, to prepare them for a formal first grade classroom. In a larger, less well-developed country in the same region, first-grade teachers make the first six weeks of their classes more like their pupils' informal pre-school experience: child-centred, interactive, no desks and chairs and with more play than is called for in most grade 1 curricula.

Thus, the dilemma: to ease the transition from pre-school to primary school, do we formalise the informal in order to give children the best possible start in an increasingly competitive academic world, or do we informalise the formal, reversing the growing rigid and achievement-oriented nature of early primary education?

Unfortunately, the former seems to be the trend. Anecdotal evidence tells of more and more elite, private primary schools (and even pre-primary schools) requiring entrance examinations to prove the learning readiness of new entrants, including an early mastery of (at least) reading. This is due partly to the fact that pre-schools are often the first rung of a private education ladder that, once attained, makes unnecessary the search for further enrolment. But this puts pressure on pre-primaries to be more

academic and competitive, with less time for childcentred learning and less ability to shape education to a pupil's family context (e.g., its home language) or to a child's individual needs (e.g., reading difficulties). According to academic specialists and practitioners, this is exactly what they should not be.

There is another reason for this trend. With seemingly good intentions, many governments are expanding pre-school services but, to be costefficient, they are attaching the new classes to primary schools, especially in countries where the population rate increase is decreasing and where there exist unused primary school resources, including teachers. This can mean that both the learning space and style are formal, teacher-centred, with more work and less play, and often with teaching in an incomprehensible majority language rather than a mother tongue.

So what to do? In a Utopian world, the best-qualified teachers would teach in primary school (if not pre-school), where classes are larger and the challenges of individualised instruction greater, rather than in secondary school. But this is only feasible if a government commits resources to a unified system of education, with the same level of training, remuneration and status for teachers in both primary and secondary education.

Failing this, and to the extent that they have control over pre-school curricula and methods, public but perhaps also private ministries can ensure that pre-primary schools continue be places of play and learning stimulation, rather than places of regimented study, homework and academic competition. They could also demand that all primary school teacher trainees, especially those



A child-friendly school must be inclusive of all children, academically effective with all children, healthy and protective of children and gender-sensitive

who opt to work in early primary education, receive training in the more informal, child-centred processes of pre-school education and in the often difficult transition process from pre-school (or the home) to primary school. Special skills, such as the analysis of individual needs and the development of individualised instruction, could be included. More systematic and better planned transitions could allow pre-school-age children and their parents to get acquainted with the primary school before starting there and make special efforts to integrate grade 1 children into their new environment.

#### **Child-friendly schools**

This means that the primary school must become a more welcoming place. Child-Friendly Schools, developed in Thailand over a decade ago (pioneered by UNICEF and Save the Children) and now being implemented in over 40 countries, are important to achieve this. Such schools have several purposes:

- to help children realise their right to good-quality education;
- to enhance the health and well-being of children;
- to guarantee children safe, protective spaces for learning and free them from violence and abuse;
- to raise teacher morale and motivation (in other words, child-friendly equals teacher-friendly);
- to mobilise community support for education.

Child-friendly schools are meant to be child-seeking schools: actively identifying excluded children, getting them enrolled in school and included in learning, and helping to monitor the rights and wellbeing of all children in the community. They must also be child-centred: acting in the best interests of the child, leading to the realisation of the child's full potential, focused on the 'whole' child (health, nutritional status and well-being), and concerned about what happens to the child before entering school and after leaving it.

In particular, a child-friendly school must be inclusive of all children, academically effective with all children, healthy and protective of children and gender-sensitive. It should welcome participation in school affairs by the children, their parents and their community.

A school *inclusive* of all children does not exclude, discriminate against, or stereotype on the basis of difference. It provides education that is free, compulsory, affordable and accessible, especially to families and children at risk. It respects and welcomes diversity and ensures equal opportunities for all children e.g., girls, ethnic minorities, working children, children with disabilities, and AIDS-affected children. It responds to diversity, seeing it as an opportunity rather than a problem, and meets the differing needs of children, whether resulting from gender, social class, ethnicity or ability.

An inclusive grade 1 class is especially important, since its pupils will come from different backgrounds (from pre-schools or from their homes) often with different languages and levels of preparedness. The teacher of such a class must recognise such diversity as a way to enhance the quality of education and must be able to meet the pupils' diverse needs.

An academically effective school promotes goodquality teaching and learning, including instruction appropriate to each child's learning needs and abilities. It provides structured content and goodquality resources and promotes quality learning outcomes by helping children learn what they need to learn (e.g., literacy, numeracy, life skills) and teaching them how to learn.

Thus, an effective grade 1 classroom, adapted to its pupils' diverse needs, is essential for a good start in basic literacy and numeracy, instilling in the children good and life-long learning habits.

A healthy and protective school has a learning environment that is healthy, hygienic and safe. It provides life-skills based health education; it promotes the physical and the psycho/socio/ emotional health of teachers and learners; and it helps to defend and protect all children from harm, providing them with positive experiences.

A grade 1 classroom includes children with different levels of physical health and many kinds of emotional needs. Thus, a grade 1 teacher must not tolerate bullying and teasing; must not label children as 'smart' or 'dumb'; must understand the often difficult family backgrounds of the pupils; and must know how to begin a child's educational career positively.

A gender-sensitive school promotes gender equality in enrolment and achievement. It eliminates gender stereotypes, guarantees both boy- and girl-friendly resources, socialises children in a non-violent environment and encourages respect for rights, dignity and equality. It is critical that the notion and practice of gender relationships be introduced in grade 1 through non-stereotyped materials and teaching-learning processes, and gender-sensitive interactions among pupils.

A school which welcomes participation is childcentred, promoting child participation in school life. It is family-focused, strengthening the family as a child's primary caregiver and educator and helping children, parents and teachers establish harmonious, collaborative relationships. It is community-based, encouraging local partnerships in education, and acting in and with the community for the sake of children. Bringing a child's family into the school early in the child's school life is essential to understand the environment from which the child comes and to help parents become active participants and supporters in the education process.

#### Note

1 This article is based on an article by the author in the January–March 2006 Newsletter of the International Institute for Educational Planning, "Formalize the informal or 'informalize' the formal: The transition from pre-school to primary".

## A framework for successful transitions The continuum from home to school

"Successful transitions: the continuum from home to school" is one of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's three new programme areas, through which we are now organising and positioning our work. This article is an abridged version of a document that sets out the framework of the Foundation's current thinking on the issue of transitions in the early years.

In early childhood, children make transitions into new environments. This is usually a progression from private space in the home to public or collective spaces, such as community play groups, childcare centres, pre-schools and schools.

As with any transition in life, these events are social and sometimes biological turning points. Transitions in life are usually marked by special events, ceremonies or rites of passage and denote social expectations, responsibilities and status. The individual is expected to grow into her new role, supported by the surrounding community.

More than any other life phase, early childhood entails a succession of transitions as young children rapidly develop. Young children eagerly seek new challenges that test and apply their evolving physical, social, cognitive and emotional capacities. All members of society, whether young or old, take pleasure in gaining valued, new competencies.

The right to play and recreation (art. 31(1) of the UNCRC)<sup>1</sup>; to participate freely in cultural life and the arts (art. 31(2)); to engage in one's own culture, religion and language (art. 30) and to exercise rights according to a child's evolving capacities (art. 5) are particularly significant, as young children learn through engagement with the world around them. Successful transitions are challenging and therefore rewarding. However, they should not present young children with obstacles they cannot reasonably overcome. Every child has a different starting point which needs to be respected.

For young children's transitions to be successful, we must recognise that early childhood is a life phase carrying the same rights and importance as any other. It is not merely a training ground for becoming older, but a time for societies to help children cross new thresholds. Peers, families and communities play a critical role in priming children for their next steps in life.

The foundation's transition programme is concerned with two angles. First, the structural and systemic factors in childcare, pre-school or school environments that may act to exclude children. Second, the strengths and weaknesses children bring to these new situations. Working to build children's strengths can contribute to offsetting limitations in those environments, while well-designed childcare establishments, pre-schools and schools can help to overcome the multiple effects of disadvantaged circumstances that undermine young children's development and coping mechanisms. This interplay among different environments is crucial.

This article starts by placing transitions in a child rights framework and explaining its importance. It goes on to outline our assessment of problems that exist with transitions, the three topics we are addressing in our work – access, language and creating rights-based cultures in educational settings – and the crosscutting strategies we will pursue.

#### **Child rights**

Every child has rights, including the rights to education, participation, play and recreation. Child rights are central to our approach because

adopting the language of rights helps to point out the responsibility of duty-bearers to support children's development; and thinking in terms of rights promotes respect for children's agency in influencing their environments. We view the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and associated General Comments<sup>2</sup> (particularly numbers 1 and 7) as providing a powerful reference point and source of legitimacy for the transition issue.

Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC talk of the right to compulsory primary education, which promotes the development of language, personality, mental and physical abilities, and social, cultural and environmental values. General Comment 7 (GC7) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child interprets this right to education during early childhood as "beginning at birth and being closely linked to young children's right to maximum development". It emphasises that education takes place in many settings other than school, and stresses the important roles of parents, caregivers, grandparents, peers and communities.

In GC7, the Committee "recommends that States parties pay greater attention to, and actively support, a rights-based approach to early childhood programmes, including initiatives surrounding transition to primary school that ensure continuity and progression, in order to build children's confidence, communication skills and enthusiasm for learning through their active involvement in, among others, planning activities." GC7 recognises the role of parents as children's first educators, and the importance of working with communities to provide culturally relevant early childhood programmes, rather than imposing a standardised approach.

#### The problem

Starting school is often a difficult experience for a child. Imagine a 6-year-old girl's first day at a state school in a resource-poor environment. She has no uniform, paper, pencil or books: children whose families have money bring their own materials, while the rest go without or find someone with whom to share. There may be over 50 children in the class, or over 100 in some places, of mixed ages. Some are younger than 6, but many are older because of class repetition and late entry. It will often be the case that most are boys.

The teacher is overwhelmed by trying to maintain order verbally and through corporal punishment. The child cannot count on protection or attention from the teacher, who is an intimidating figure, and teacher absenteeism rates mean there may often be no teacher at all. If the girl is lucky, she will have older siblings to guide her, or will make friends who provide social reinforcement.

The language of instruction is foreign. The latrines do not offer privacy. There is no water for washing. Her parents are far away, working. They do not interact with the school because they do not speak the language. They themselves dropped out early or did not attend school. The distance to school is far for a 6-year-old but if she is lucky she can go with others, gaining social interaction and protection on the way. The journey may have physical and social hazards, especially in violent urban contexts, conflict areas, or rough rural terrain.

Clearly, not every entry to school will pose these problems, but most involve difficulties for the child. There is generally less autonomy, choice and explanation for children at school than at home. A school's institutional values, vocabulary, system and culture may seem alien. Even if a child has picked up some understanding from siblings or friends, it is difficult to appreciate what school will be like before it is actually experienced. Children who learn to adjust, often find themselves adopting increasingly different norms from the home and community.

Transition to primary school can be greatly helped by providing services for young children, such as parental support, play groups, home visiting or centre-based care. However, worldwide there is relatively little government investment in such systems. This is perverse, because the economic, social and human benefits of investment in the early years are well documented. Studies by the World Bank<sup>3</sup> and others estimate the benefit-to-cost ratio of early childhood development programmes at around 3:1, and almost double that if programmes primarily reach children who are most disadvantaged.

When insufficient attention is paid to the transition to school, the result is a high rate of dropout<sup>4</sup> and class repetition; the average dropout and repetition combined rate in developing countries is 30 percent.



Peers, families and communities play a critical role in priming children for their next steps in life. Parental involvement is a robust predictor of a child's success at school

This makes the school system inefficient with massive financial implications for both governments and families, not to mention the associated social costs of illiteracy, unemployment, delinquency and crime.

Why is there so little government investment? One possible reason is that early childhood programmes are associated with upper and middle class children and therefore seen as a luxury. Another is that many early childhood studies identify benefits relatively far in the future, 10 years or more, and politicians tend to seek faster results. A third is that young children are usually seen as the responsibility of women, who are considered less important politically and economically.

A further contributing factor is that early childhood programmes are often perceived as competing for resources with primary schools, in part because of donor agendas emphasising formal schooling. Early childhood educators tend to be trained, paid and represented less well than their primary counterparts. Many early childhood programmes

operate in an informal sector, weakening their negotiating power. As the early childhood workforce is predominantly female, gender discrimination also plays a role.

The reasons why children drop out of school are well known<sup>5</sup>. Out-of-pocket expenses for books, transport and uniforms and informal payments demanded by teachers are unaffordable, as are opportunity costs in families where children contribute to household labour, child care and income generation. Parents may perceive that education is of negligible value to the foreseeable future, and children come to their own conclusions about the school environment and their preferred options. Some children encounter hazards on long journeys to school. Others are confronted with physical, verbal or emotional abuse within the school itself, involving both adults and other children.

Children who are not adequately nourished struggle to make the most of educational opportunities, as do those whose home language or dialect differs from that used in school. Even when the language is the same, environments at home vary widely in terms of supporting language and literacy, indicated by large variations in vocabulary levels among school-entry children, correlated to socioeconomic class. Oral cultures and media are important environmental factors that add to or detract from language development. The same goes for the degree of verbal interaction with children and the presence of reading material at home.

These are well-established facts. What is less widely appreciated is that dropouts take place disproportionately in the first two years of schooling and is a worldwide trend. The dearth of small classes and well-trained teachers in the critical first years of school detracts from effective, efficient education – in some cases to a radical degree. First year teachers often do little more than crowd management, instead of dedicating time and skill to language and literacy development.

Teaching fundamental literacy and numeracy in large classes could be possible through peer interaction, multi-age groups and child-to-child methodologies. However this requires good management skills and teacher training is usually minimised for those teaching the youngest children, increasing with the age of children to be taught. In developing countries, most grade 1 teachers are not trained to foster language, literacy and numeracy skills in creative and enjoyable ways.

Another contradiction between research findings and practice involves the relationship between schools and communities<sup>6</sup>. We know that socioeconomic background matters more to educational performance than any preparation prior to school, and that parental involvement is a robust predictor of a child's success at school. Yet the reality is that disadvantaged families are least likely to be involved and listened to in school environments. When the child is in school, the parents are out of the picture and the teacher is the centre with a fundamentally different mindset.

#### **Topics and strategies**

Based on this analysis, the Foundation is focusing on three main topics in our work on transitions. This choice was made using our history, which constitutes our current expertise, a scan of external knowledge, and work being done by others to identify possibilities where the Foundation might play a useful future role. These topics are: access to early education, language development and entrenching rights in early education.

Access is about maximising young children's access to early childhood education and primary school. This is a huge topic, but access is the vital first step to a successful transition. It needs to take account of 'push' factors like the attitudes of parents, peers and family, and 'pull' factors such as the quality and accountability of schools.

The Foundation is concentrating on funding, testing and publicising existing relatively simple, efficient approaches and bringing children into services or schools. Key questions are: what motivates children to go to education centres or school? What motivates parents to put their children in pre-school or school and keep them there? The answers are largely known: peer influence, stimulating and child-friendly environments, safe spaces for boys and girls, no school fees, convenient services, education and its relevance to life and future opportunities, and pre-school and school combined with other responsibilities.

Our second topic is improving language development and literacy and numeracy skills among children under 8 years. Language continues to be one of the major stumbling blocks to a child's transition to formal education, particularly when the medium of instruction is not the child's first language<sup>7</sup>.

Functional literacy and numeracy within the first two years of schooling are necessary skills for future learning and adjustment in society. The Foundation will concentrate on curriculum approaches, supporting literate environments, promoting emerging literacy in homes and communities, and encouraging family members and peers to support language development, regardless of their own level of literacy.

As with access, there is already substantial literature on the role of language and the Foundation will seek to build on and advocate existing approaches, rather than expect to contribute significant new knowledge. Our third topic is to entrench knowledge and implementation of child rights within early childhood education, schools, homes and society. Trendsetters in these settings need to be identified to act as vanguards in introducing child rights in practice.

Everyday interactions and routines in the classroom and early childhood education centres determine behaviour, attitude and performance expectations. To survive the difficult first years of school, children need formidable social skills and emotional resilience to navigate explicit rules and the implicit codes of hierarchy formation, making new friends and solving conflicts.

Classroom culture is formed by teachers, parents, caregivers and, most of all, by children, and is constantly in flux. Educators can play an important role in setting boundaries and creating norms but approaches tend to be teacher-centred and may overestimate the importance of adults in creating classroom culture. Of the three topics, this is the one where the Foundation sees the greatest potential in contributing new insights, by concentrating on the role of peer relations in creating cultures consistent with respect for children's rights.

We will be examining how best to build relationships between centres, schools, caregivers and communities, which create cultures that effectively implement rights, even if the language of rights is not common in the local discourse. In particular, we will emphasise children's agency, taking into account that the numbers and influence of children among themselves often far outweighs that of adults.

We have identified five themes that cut across these topics, forming the basis for our strategies on transition. They are:

- Peers and 'priming'. The importance of peers in supporting children through transition tends to get less attention than the role of parents and teachers. Older children play a big role in 'priming' younger children or siblings for what to expect in new situations. This is particularly noticeable where children are a large proportion of the overall population.
- Intergenerational support. Parents and grandparents tend to be the decision-makers about

- whether or not, and for how long, children go to pre-school or school. Children are more likely to stick with school if they perceive that their families expect it. Issues here include family literacy, the role of fathers and elders in the transmission of cultural knowledge, and maternal education.
- Curriculum and pedagogy. Whether they are formulated in detail or as a general guideline allowing for local adaptation and input, curricula ultimately need to be judged in terms of practice and outcome. Key questions are: Do we need improvements in existing curricula, or only to translate them into practice? What are the gaps between curricula, practice and the expectations of parents and children?
- Children's agency. Children should be encouraged to influence their environment, but should also learn responsibility within collective and communal identities. Indicators of agency must be nuanced with reference to a child's evolving capacities, motivation, self-confidence and relationships.
- Leadership and supervision. Schools and early childhood centres should be the centre of, and accountable, to the community. Institutional decision-makers and supervisors should provide leadership to justify performance improving changes in the transition years, especially appropriate policies, resources and training. There should be a smaller class sizes per teacher; more training, especially in language, literacy, numeracy and rights; greater efforts to listen to children and caregivers; and more explicit attention to non-cognitive factors such as self-esteem, development of social identities and emotional security.

#### Messages

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a learning organisation, committed to refining our understanding. But we are also an advocacy organisation, intent on sharing messages when we feel they are sufficiently established.

In terms of transitions, our key message is that schools should focus attention and resources on the first years of schooling. Most primary schools prioritise resources towards the later years to strengthen exam results. The best teachers with the best training and salaries are in the later years

and group sizes are often smaller. Yet the greatest school challenges are supporting children's learning experiences in the first years, motivating them to do well later on. Socioeconomic and parental influence on children's educational performance tells us that schools need to understand, and interact with, the situations where children come from, not just the places they are going to.

A second important message is that *significant improvements are possible in a relatively short term*, *i.e.*, *2–3 years*. This is important in order to garner political support for early childhood. Schools will save money if class repetition and withdrawal rates are reduced, freeing resources to improve teaching quality, institute smaller classes and create an environment conducive to active learning during the first years of school. A strong focus in the transition years will help children achieve language fluency, literacy, numeracy, rights awareness, social identities and knowledge of the world around them. Education should motivate children to learn in spite of obstacles end equip them with valuable life skills, even if their school tenure is short.

#### The role of the Bernard van Leer Foundation

Through support of *direct intervention*, the Foundation expects to improve day-to-day learning opportunities of young children, ensuring access to education and a degree of quality that allows children to develop according to their potential. We will track rates of enrolment, class repetition, retention in school as well as analyse qualitative feedback from children, parents, caregivers, teachers and leaders. We will learn from the strategies at hand, compare them with others and share those insights among local circuits.

The Foundation will try out new approaches and ideas in local contexts and document and compare them with other documented results. Where warranted, it will disseminate evidence or ideas in a form appropriate for use in any country.

The Foundation will cooperate with influential networks and establish alliances that will multiply our own influence.

Lastly, it will bring together individuals and institutions from different disciplines and sectors

(public, private, academic, civic) in order to test our ideas, engage with wider knowledge and position our own messages among prominent circles.

#### **Notes**

- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989),
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## Mississippi, USA After-school – a model for effective transition

Bettye Ward Fletcher<sup>1</sup>, President, Professional Associates

Every child has the right to grow, learn and thrive in an environment that is safe, nurturing and stimulating. For poor American children such opportunities are limited; despite America's affluence, poverty continues to exist in many of its communities, both rural and urban. America's overall poverty rate<sup>2</sup> is 12.5 percent; and at 17 percent, the fastest growing poverty group is children<sup>3</sup>. With 17.9 percent of the state's population living in poverty, Mississippi is the third poorest state in America, and the Delta is Mississippi's poorest region.

African-American children in the Mississippi Delta are growing up in a dichotomised society, and in an environment that is inextricably linked to race – ethnically the Delta is 70 percent African American, and over one-third of African-American children under 18 years old grow up in poverty.

Aside from the abundant human capital in the Mississippi Delta, there are major gaps in available resources for the community. Resources that are found in most American communities such as libraries, boys and girls clubs, swimming pools and other activities, are generally absent. The geographical dispersion of people in some of these communities makes it difficult to access services. Also, many parents are not at home during the day as they have to travel long distances to work, so it's common to see children playing in the streets unsupervised.

Transition to kindergarten at the age of 5 – elementary school starts a year later – will usually be a child's first interaction with formal education. For both children and parents this presents a challenge of learning a new culture, the culture of formal

education. They need to build relationships with a new set of individuals of a kind that they haven't dealt with before, in an environment that's more structured than they're used to.

First-time parents in the Delta may not have developed an appreciation of the importance of reading to their children, or of developing relationships with their children's teachers. Literacy and vocabulary are an issue for many children making the transition to school, particularly in lower-wealth communities. The language children are expected to use in schools may be more formal than the language they're used to speaking in the home.

#### The Mississippi Delta Children's Partnership

The Mississippi Delta Children's Partnership (MDCP) is a community-based programme focused on children and families. The Partnership consists of five nonprofit organisations which serve a total of 17 socially and geographically isolated communities in five Delta counties. The concept of 'partnership' is central to what we do - building a reciprocal partnership between schools, parents and communities. This partnership seeks to nurture excellence and affirm parents. It is a process that helps the child and parent feel comfortable and build relationships with new environments, to feel that they're valued, that they have a perspective that's appreciated, that there is an acknowledgement and recognition of the culture that they bring into that relationship.

Each site has an independently designed childfocused programme that emphasises language development, academic performance, social and cognitive development and self and ethnic



The MDCP programme addresses culture by placing emphasis on integrating the rich history of the Delta into the curriculum of the Children's Villages

group efficacy. These after-school/summer school programmes are called 'Children's Villages'. Families are a significant component of the Partnership and are engaged through 'Family Circles'. In our Family Circle meetings, we aim to build the self-esteem of parents by affirming and empowering them, first as individuals and then as parents.

One may ask why use a after-school/summer school programme for transition purposes? First and foremost, transition is a process, not an exit-entry event. After-school provides critical extended support for successful school transition. The programme helps students establish and maintain a strong early educational foundation. The selection of an out-of-school-time model which emphasises reading and mathematics is particularly well suited for poor and African-American students. These students consistently achieve below the national average in these two disciplines and the gap widens as they continue in school<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, early

intervention in the form of on-going educational enrichment helps these children make the initial transition as well as provides support for continued success.

Quality after-school must provide curricula continuity between regular school and the programme through assessment, feedback and evaluation of the child's progress and needs. The content focus is on reading, language and mathematics skills. It is designed as an individualised instruction system which meets the needs of mixed-ability children. This allows the after-school to provide real-time assistance in areas where children are experiencing difficulty. It also enables the programme staff to share concrete objective feedback with school teachers and parents.

Quality summer/after-school programmes provide a safe and nurturing environment that motivate, inspire, and support age-appropriate development in settings

outside the traditional classroom. This is critical for children in the Delta because of the general absence of any child-focused facilities and activities.

Lastly, linkages and collaboration with public schools and communities are essential dimensions of a quality summer/after-school programme. These are strengths of the Children's Villages. Facilities and resources are shared. One Village is physically located in a school building. This collaborative arrangement has several advantages. It is convenient for children, parents and teachers. It allows for easy exchange of information between the regular school and after-school staff. Further, the children use public school transportation and retired school teachers are recruited to work in the summer/after-school programme.

#### **Appreciative enquiry**

The 'appreciative enquiry' tool we use involves focusing attention on what an individual can do, not what they can't. We engage parents in a storytelling model, where they talk about their peak experiences. For example, we ask them to recall times when they, as a child, had an experience with their parents that made them feel good. And times when, as a parent, they did something with their child that made them feel good. The theory is that people tend to gravitate towards the direction of what they talk about. If they talk about peak experiences, and not the problems of poverty, they will gravitate in that direction.

Unfortunately all schools do not necessarily function on an asset-based paradigm, i.e., dwelling on what people do have rather than what they don't, and affirming their hopes and abilities. We believe that when children's culture is valued, they will be motivated to excel. The cultural experiences of children and parents are important and need to be understood and acknowledged by all who work with children.

We attempt to address culture by placing emphasis on integrating the rich history of the Delta into the curriculum of the Children's Villages. We have a resource person who is an expert in how African-American children learn through a culturally relevant pedagogy. She works to integrate culture into their learning, such as looking at examples of leadership in the civil rights movement – visiting

museums, and inviting guest speakers – and the history of the Delta as the birthplace of the blues.

Let me hasten to add that there are programmes in schools that do this – February, for example, is African-American history month. However, it is our perspective that it's important for cultural affirmation to be integrated throughout the children's experience, because children learn best in environments in which they are affirmed culturally.

MDCP works on the premise that building strong and empowering relationships, in which people feel equally valued, is a collaborative process involving schools, parents and communities with the child at the centre. The Children's Villages provide spaces that are convenient for both teachers and parents and allow for even-handed feedback on a child's progress, with no shaming and blaming.

Children's Villages assess each child individually and allow for learning deficits which have been created by poverty to be tackled in real time. One child might be weak on vocabulary, another on phonics; the Children's Village teacher can send a note to the class teacher saying which child has been working on what. Last month I was invited by a school board to talk about how we can build the collaborative relationship between Children's Villages and schools; one good idea is including teachers from Children's Villages in the school's professional staff development activities.

We are in the formative stage of building relationships with schools, but the general attitude has been very receptive and supportive. This is in part because of the way we frame the issue. We focus on how this partnership can support a school's mission and goals, and help the school to be successful.

In the state of Mississippi, there is a system of school accountability in which schools are rated from a level of one to five on the basis of pupils' performances. We emphasise that Children's Villages have the goal of improving literacy and math; the school's ratings improve when the child performs better in those subjects. Schools want children to excel academically, and so do parents and communities. It's a win-win proposition.

So you may ask why does it take us to come along and point this out? Well, institutions are now recognizing the mutually rewarding benefits of community collaboration. We need to bring the message of reaffirming how much we need to collaborate and work in partnership.

It is our hope that collaboration will become the norm within the communities served by MDCP. Our vision of success is that communities, schools and parents realise the benefits of a mutually rewarding relationship without needing a Bernard van Leer Foundation or a Bettye Ward Fletcher to come along and catalyse the relationship. This model certainly has the potential for replication, especially as it involves building indigenous capacity.

We believe the partnerships MDCP is building will be sustainable because we leverage existing resources, maximise the use of natural and voluntary abilities, and build organisational capacity. Though the project is in its early stages, it also includes an evaluation mechanism so that as time passes we will be able to look at our objectives and see if we are making a difference in the lives of children, families and communities.

#### Notes

- 1 Dr. Bettye Ward Fletcher is a career academician, researcher and administrator. She is the founder and President of Professional Associates, Inc., a research and evaluation organisation which is engaged in programme development, evaluation, and capacity-building in rural and indigenous communities. This article benefited from additional input by Andrew Wright.
- 2 National Center for Children in Poverty, 2005
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## Early childhood education in rural India Exploring mechanisms to improve home-school links

Cherukuri Indira Dasgupta, Research and Planning Coordinator, PIDT<sup>1</sup>

The discussion in this article is based on the wider context of the experience of the People's Institute for Development and Training (PIDT) over many years in organising non-formal schools in rural India. It also takes into account a study that PIDT did in collaboration with the Bernard van Leer Foundation, "Acculturation of the child to schooling - a multiethnic study". Though the study mostly dealt with primary school-ready children in non-formal education (NFE<sup>2</sup>) schools between the ages of 6 and 14, it provided useful insights into how pre-school education should meet children's developmental needs, thus opening villages to possibilities for integration and change without compromising indigenous values and skills that have sustained them so far.

### Acculturation of the child to schooling – PIDT's experience with three rural communities

PIDT found an eagerness for education among both parents and children, and among girls as well as boys. The villagers with whom PIDT works understand that education increases opportunities, improves lifestyles, enlarges household management capacities and introduces skills that are valuable for girls as well as boys, even within the traditional social structure. However, there is still a struggle to integrate formal education values into community practice. In fact, according to parents, a major complaint about boys who went to government schools was that they did not want to work so much as to eat and dress well, and buy expensive things like watches or bicycles. Success in their studies came second.

On the other hand, many a bright girl was seen aiding her brother with his assignment rather than doing her own work, believing that education was more important for boys than for girls, because of the way they had been placed into different roles.

Clearly, the acculturation to different values at home and school, with obvious divisions between parents and children, creates distrust, distancing and disorientation. In order to develop good individuals and responsible citizens, it is essential to seek commonalities, or an understanding of differences, so that children can learn to balance changing and competing worldviews while retaining their identity and roots.

While girl-child education is a major step forward in these communities, equal education must still be translated into expanding opportunities for women. Education has become desirable for girls, where it was previously considered unnecessary; but it is used in ways that co-opt it back into gender-specific roles such as increasing a woman's marriage value. Given that mind frames and social structures take time to change, girl-child education is a first stage towards equal intellectual opportunities, with the caveat that other factors beyond mere access to education need to be addressed.

Even though children may grow up to develop values other than those of their parents or teachers, they will do so consciously, with a basis for comparison and with a good foundation, if a set of educational values has been emphasised from the outset. But if they start from a value vacuum, they may be always at the mercy of circumstance, never really owning their lives.

The challenge, then, in meeting the physical, social, psychological, emotional and intellectual needs of

children, for their holistic development in a preschool setting, is to provide care and nurturing of children as individuals and as members of a community, as well as intellectual stimulation and knowledge acquisition. This concept of early child development should be communicated to parents who may have different expectations of pre-school and of formal education.

#### A smooth transition from home to school: lessons from the study

#### Lesson 1: A considerable amount of early learning for children is emotive and takes time.

Hemlal, a quiet tribal child, was well looked after by his elder sister, who taught him to read and write and consoled him if anyone bothered him. The first day Hemlal attended class he sat with his peer group; but perhaps he felt threatened because he switched to sitting next to his sister for about a month before he sat separately again.

Little children with older siblings were often given freedom of expression. They were also dependent on their mothers, in differing degrees, with breastfeeding sometimes continuing to 6 years of age. The NFE school setting was in the open, allowing elders to be onlookers when they wished, to keep intact the emotional synergy in the upbringing of the children.

It was observed that young children learn from the way in which lessons are given as much as from the content. For example, children who were disinterested, distracted or not able to answer, not only understood when constantly encouraged by the teachers, but answered questions with interest and with a significantly enhanced response time.

Perhaps the feeling of security this provides is fundamental to the child's ability to focus on the lesson and to the development of flexible mental pathways needed for intellectual growth. Emotional investment, support and respect for the children by the teacher are crucial for proper socialisation and must not be sacrificed in the pursuit of early education outside the home. Thus, by involving the family in the teaching process, allowing siblings to sit together and parents to look on, or by ensuring that the teacher provides adequate emotional

support to the children, the transition from home to school can be eased.

#### Lesson 2: Interactive experience-based learning develops the cognitive and social skills necessary for future learning.

Sanjoy was a serious boy. He was getting particularly confused between the numbers 6 and 9. The teacher momentarily lost patience and scolded Sanjoy severely and the boy burst into tears. When the teacher changed the mode of instruction by using stones and twigs, the little boy overcame his grief and managed to learn very quickly.

In rural communities in India, first-generation school-going children depend on tactile and sensory learning. They have a strong relationship with their surroundings, relying more on experiential than deductive reasoning for cognitive understanding. Elements of experiential learning should be incorporated creatively into the curricula so that the richness of sensory perception and intuition in the rural child is not lost, thereby preventing distancing between family and child.

#### Lesson 3: Cross-generational and sibling interaction and support are invaluable assets to build self-esteem and readiness to learn. Sahida, a 10-year-old, was called to the blackboard to read out her letters. On seeing this, her 5-year-

old sister, who was roaming outside the class, came running to stand next to her and tried to copy her.

Many children in rural India live in large and sometimes extended families where they naturally develop an ability to relate to people of different ages and form close relationships with their siblings. Older siblings often take care of younger children and become role models. Rather than cutting children off from this pre-existing support structure by age-divided classrooms, it proved productive to allow children of different ages to share the same classroom, even if they were at different learning levels. In this context, young children felt more pressure to attend to their studies, and elder children, in helping their younger siblings, better internalised the lessons. It was also the case that older children would often help younger brothers and sisters with homework after school.

Sibling support builds the confidence of young children, showing them how to interact in a strange environment with a broader social network of peers and elders. Family interaction within a pre-school context helps to ease the transition from home to public space and provides young children with immediate role models.

Although at the time of the study gendered social roles remained distinct, it is likely that learning alongside, and with the support of, their elder sisters, influences young boys' gender perceptions, providing them with female role models.

#### Lesson 4: Incorporation of local skills and culture helps to educate communities rather than creating alienated individuals.

Dates were in season. The children, while sitting in class, wanted to pick them and eat the tender seed inside. They made excuses of wanting to go to the toilet but instead went to pluck the fruit.

The context in which a culture is based is significant in retaining children's spontaneity and survival instincts. Local skills, folk tales, games, songs and dances form a strong part of early childhood education. Respect for traditional lifestyles goes alongside new opportunities, maintaining harmony between the generations and pride in their heritage.

#### Lesson 5: Values formed should be included in education delivery.

Firos, usually reticent, was called upon to recite the numbers from 1 to 100 so that others could follow. He succeeded and this encouraged him to take a more active role in class. Firos had complained to his mother that he had never been asked to lead, though he knew his numbers well.

Naively, the child associated his ability to articulate correctly as an ability to lead, which he obviously considered a very important role. Understanding a child's values would enable the teacher to develop the child's potential, breaking communications barriers that prevent children and parents from interacting effectively with the school system. This is more critical for girls, who often disengage themselves from education earlier than boys, due to social constructs and perceived limitations of their future roles in the community.

#### Conclusion

Observation of the acculturation process shows that learning in the early years includes broad developmental milestones such as body hygiene, greetings to elders and strangers, patience and concentration, communication with non-family members, recognition of unknown images, logical reasoning and the interchange of sibling dependence with peer group friendship.

Recognising the social integration and personal growth that early education fosters, the NFE schools established by PIDT sought to integrate the communication of social values, the culture and skill base of resident communities, the family support structure, interactive and engaging teaching methods, and most importantly, a nurturing approach. It was our experience that recognition and conscious practice of these qualities facilitates the transition process for children between home and school.

At the end of the day, the development of children's self-esteem and the opening of their minds to ideas and concepts beyond the local context were the key aspects of the acculturation that was initiated. The most important understanding gained through the study was that this process should be directed in a manner that retains family links and a child's sense of identity.

- 1 People's Institute for Development and Training is a voluntary organisation working at the grassroots of rural India in Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Delhi on issues of education, women's empowerment, child development, livelihood and environment, amongst the marginalised.
- The NFE schools were held in shady areas outdoors, in locations decided by parents in the communities, and classes were taken in a circular arrangement to foster interaction between children and engagement in the learning process. Teaching methods incorporated games and songs and encouraged children to ask questions. The schools were set up to provide accelerated primary education to children aged 6-14 who had not had access to education, and were highly successful, with all but one child passing into the sixth level of government school at the end of the year.

## Transitions in pastoral communities in Uganda Classes under the trees

Nathan Chelimo, Regional Advisor - Education, Save the Children Uganda

In the past, the children of pastoralists in Karamoja, Uganda, never went to school because their forefathers had cursed education. It was not an outright refusal of education, but rather the competing need for subsistence labour. The Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK) programme and the Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) programmes, introduced among the Karamojong communities, has encouraged them to enroll their children in schools. The programmes help smooth the transition from non-formal to formal schooling, and monitor the children's performance, contributing to avoiding high dropout rates in the formal school system.

#### **Access to informal schools**

The ABEK programme is funded by several organisations, including Save the Children and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and it approaches education knowing the realities of a pastoral childhood. Through it, the people of Karamoja, who have a precarious labour-intensive lifestyle with an over-dependence on women and children for domestic and agro-pastoral activities, recognised that education and pastoralism can go together. In a symbolic ceremony in 1995 they cleansed the curse that their forefathers had pronounced on the pen, marking the birth of formal education in Karamoja. The ECDE programme, meanwhile, strengthens the capacity of early childhood care, development and education, and facilitates the transition from home to ABEK and then to formal schools.

In support of the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education<sup>1</sup>, ABEK focuses on changing negative attitudes to education in general, and on the education of girls in particular. It does this by providing a curriculum relevant to the Karamojong child and encouraging a path to formal school. Teaching is conducted in community centres

near the Karamojong homesteads, but increasingly children are taught under trees, at suitable hours so that learning does not interfere with domestic chores, by community tutors known as facilitators. The facilitators are recruited from the immediate vicinity and trained on the job. Karamojong elders are involved in all aspects of planning, approving and monitoring the programme.

The ABEK scheme makes education relevant to a pastoral lifestyle and has drastically changed parental attitudes. Rather than seeing education as a threat, the majority of the Karamojong parents now wave their children off to school.

The curriculum is fused with topics emphasising reading, writing, numeracy, life skills and occupational skills. It is a package in 10 non-linear thematic modules, written in the local language with instructions on literacy and numeracy in both English and the local language, within the context of pastoral life. Teaching methods are participatory and functional, and linked to indigenous knowledge and basic life skills.

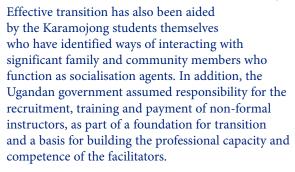
#### A smooth transition to formal school

To strengthen the link between ABEK and the formal schools, the district implementation teams organise workshop training for formal school teachers, school management committees, and parent–teacher associations on the ABEK philosophy and methods. The training discusses ways to follow up, optimise knowledge and skills and support children who cross from ABEK to formal schools. It also sets a framework for similar standards within ABEK and the formal school system to ensure a smooth transition. Children are encouraged to move to formal schools whenever they are ready. Since 1999 over 7,000 Karamojong children have joined formal schools, out of a total of nearly 33,000 learners in 268 ABEK learning centres.

#### **Approach**

Planning for more effective transitions from informal to formal schools for children should take into account:

- support of family literacy practices to improve literacy skills;
- strengthening of classroom practices to support the community lifestyle;
- sharing of good practices in each setting:
- differentiation between discontinuities common to all children and those linked to their culture or social context, taking into account both home and school environments that encourage continuity.



#### **Challenges**

- The ABEK programme, in encouraging the Karamojong to endorse education, calls for substantial government investment in schools and ECD interventions, the latter currently vested in the hands of the private sector. Each formal school must adhere to minimum Ministry of Education standards.
- Verbal interaction promotes early literacy, but children who enrol in formal schools are held back by lack of reading materials at home, resulting in a limited vocabulary. The revival of traditional literacy practices in pastoral communities, such as story telling, should be supported.
- The ABEK teachers are local para-professionals with limited training, selected from within the community. This greatly affects the teaching strategy during the transition to formal school. Identification of learning processes, a wide curriculum, versatile activities and a good



Formal literacy programmes have tended to increase the need for coping mechanisms, such as special monitoring and support of the Karamojong students, particularly in reading, comprehension and writing

- teaching language are central to building connections between ABEK and the formal system.
- Traditionally, Karamojong beliefs were that education was unnecessary as a livestock livelihood provided for all needs. Families still rely heavily on children for housework, childcare and other tasks, but parents are asked to release at least one or two children from their duties to attend formal school, which is critical to keeping students in school. When ABEK learners join formal schools they are no longer as available to do domestic chores.
- Formal literacy programmes have tended to increase the need for coping mechanisms, such as special monitoring and support of the Karamojong students, particularly in reading, comprehension and writing.

The challenging livelihood and socio-economic realities of pastoralist communities demand that children are engaged in contributing to household survival. A flexible education system recognising this reality may be the only option to provide an opportunity for children in this context to balance schooling with household obligations.

#### Note

1 The second goal of the Millennium Development Goals sets out by the year 2015 to "ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling" <www.un.org/millenniumgoals>

# Keys to successful transitions in Guatemala Bilingual education and community participation

Benito Terraza, Director, Asociación de Promotores de Educación Inicial Bilingüe (APEDIBIMI)

The Asociación de Promotores de Educación Inicial Bilingüe (APEDIBIMI) has developed its programme in the Ixil area of El Quiché Department in northwest Guatemala, where indigenous people account for 90 percent of the population. This is the home of the Ixiles, one of the 22 ethnic Mayan groups that make up 60 percent of the total national population. Their mother tongue, Ixil, is a factor in the area's social cohesion as well as a means of transmitting and disseminating the group's traditional culture and teachings.

The indigenous rural people of Guatemala are poor and vulnerable. Many were severely affected by the civil war that devastated the country for more than four decades, from 1954 to 1996. One of the most important changes made possible by the signing of a peace agreement between the government and the insurgents was the start-up of development activities undertaken by international humanitarian organisations. This led to the organisation of committees, associations and cooperatives to foster rural development.

Yet poverty persists, in both urban and rural areas. The results of a survey conducted in 2000 by the national office of statistics showed that 6 out of 10 of Guatemala's people are poor and 2 out of 10 are very poor. Some 56 percent of indigenous people live in poverty and are excluded from the country's political, social and economic life.

Most of the children of indigenous people became indirect victims of the war. This population group has one of the highest illiteracy rates in Guatemala: in 2002, only 39 percent of children aged 3 to 6 were registered participants in the country's education system.

It was against this background that Enfants Réfugiés du Monde, a French non-governmental organisation (NGO), launched its 'Jardines Infantiles' programme. Jardines Infantiles are kindergartens, and the programme aimed to cater for the educational needs of 3- to 6-year-old children and to train local people as teachers who would consolidate and sustain the programme after the NGO had withdrawn.

The APEDIBIMI initiative grew out of this programme. APEDIBIMI is a comprehensive effort to respond to the educational needs of the whole community, and particularly the early childhood group, using bilingualism to combat social exclusion. The association's members originate from the same communities in which they offer their services and are elected by those communities. Their mother tongue is the same as the children's, but they also have Spanish. As well as living in the community where they teach, they have a knowledge of the community's history and culture and maintain regular contact with its leaders.

APEDIBIMI's mission is to 'promote the development of quality primary and pre-primary education for Ixil children up to 6 years old', with the active participation of the children's families. In its work with the children the association focuses on the following activities and subjects:

- 1. playing: in order to develop the children's social and physical abilities;
- 2. world view or outlook: this incorporates aspects such as language, cultural values, attitudes and spirituality, within everyday practices;
- 3. the environment: in order to promote respect for nature and the proper use of natural resources;
- 4. an intercultural character: this promotes the broader exchange of personal and social values;

- 5. a gender perspective: fostering equal rights and opportunities for girls and promoting their direct participation in activities, as well as awareness among fathers and mothers, community leaders and teachers:
- 6. health: through the promotion of personal hygiene and preventive health practices.

This programme is delivered to the children through two principal projects: the Educación Inicial (preprimary education) project, for children aged up to 3 and pregnant mothers; and the Jardines Infantiles project, for children aged 4 to 6. Both projects aim to ease children's transition to primary education, strengthening their abilities through play and teaching them about their culture. Children are attended by bilingual pre-primary male and female teachers.

In addition, several activities are carried out in the broader community: fathers are trained, so that they understand and can contribute to their children's education; school committees are established, so as to sustain and support education at the community level; community documentation centres are built to house libraries and provide a meeting point for planning activities; often these also serve as training centres, where meetings and workshops are held.

Direct beneficiaries and participants include some 2000 boys and girls, 25 volunteer teaching assistants, 110 pre-primary teachers, 60 students, 800 families, 98 school committee members and, on a monthly basis, 300 pre-primary, primary, secondary, or university students.

#### The Jardines Infantiles project

To date the Jardines Infantiles project has launched 20 kindergartens in 15 Ixil communities living in the Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal municipalities. These kindergartens have been recognised by Guatemala's Ministry of Education (MINEDUC).

Each Jardines Infantiles is attended by two teachers who plan and implement all activities, either in groups or individually, according to age or learning ability. The teachers also establish relationships with fathers and/or mothers and with community leaders. They must also write and produce their own teaching materials, using resources available locally as far as possible, since funds for buying materials are very limited.

These teachers are assessed by the project's technical team, which periodically delivers training courses and monitors the teacher's work on a monthly basis (continuous training).

The classroom is organised to provide learning corners for each of the programme's curriculum areas. In line with MINEDUC guidelines for the early childhood level, these areas are language and communication, logical thinking and artistic expression.

The teaching methods used are designed to compensate for the lack of contact that children have with a written language. Instead, children are taught written 'codes'. Writing exercises are continued as homework after kindergarten hours, so as to encourage exchanges between the home and school environments.

The curriculum is based on the principles of developmental psychology, which describes how children adapt to the world as a whole as well as their learning processes. This encourages the children to respond well to the school environment.

The children's own culture and identity are valued and respected. This in turn teaches them to respect the culture of other groups with whom they share the rural environment.

#### **Bilingual learning**

The whole basis of the project is that the children's language is part of their identity, so it must be used as a resource for their development and learning. By embracing bilingualism, the project encourages the children to acquire a new set of abilities using their second language, without forgetting what they have learned using their mother tongue.

The children are encouraged to use their mother tongue whenever they experience difficulties or need to express their feelings, including their fears. By learning Spanish, they are encouraged to leave these difficulties behind them as they move into primary education.

Bilingual education has two main phases:

- 1. The children's communication abilities in their mother tongue are strengthened. Most of the time the children communicate in Ixil, and Spanish is introduced only gradually, for use in specific situations in which the children are easily able to understand it and can grasp the opportunity to extend their knowledge. These situations are selected for their familiarity to the children, who thus do not need to resort to translation. Although the children continue to use mainly their mother tongues, they start using Spanish more and more for such purposes as naming the objects they use in the classroom, parts of the body, numbers, colours, sizes, and so on.
- 2. The children practise different registers of their mother tongue, graduating from everyday language to other, more formal words. This increases their self-confidence, preparing them for new situations in their lives (communicating with strangers, speaking in class at primary school, and so on). At the same time they are offered more opportunities to practise their Spanish. These include invitations to speak out loud about their drawings, some event in their lives, different classroom or natural objects, and so on. Within the same conversation, the level of difficulty will be different for older and younger children. These activities are thus expressive as well as inclusive of a broader range of situations. They assume that virtually all children are familiar with Spanish to some extent.

This second phase continues until the children enter primary school, by which time they should be well and truly accustomed to a bilingual way of learning.

#### **Community participation**

The active participation of community members promotes the children's school attendance and encourages their social development and integration. One way to promote this is by organising practical workshops where the parents are encouraged to recreate the play and learning situations of the classroom.

Mothers and fathers also work on the health, nutrition and early stimulation and childhood development aspects of the project, as well as in the development of appropriate materials for classroom work. They may, in addition, contribute cultural elements that promote respect for the culture and identity of all communities.

With community leaders, the following issues are emphasised: their commitment to early childhood matters, the need for local funding, the compiling of teaching materials, the collection of toys and the need to obtain and maintain classroom equipment.

#### An assessment of the programme

A cohort survey carried out at the beginning of 2004 provides a basis for assessing the Jardines Infantiles programme. The survey results are shown in Table 1.

The table shows that children who have attended kindergarten tend to do better in the first and second grades at primary school than those coming from the traditional system (formal preprimary education system). However, when they reach the third grade, they tend to face more difficulties and to have to repeat classes. With regard to the dropout rate, the Jardines Infantiles results are once again superior.

Table 1. Class graduation and repeat rates in primary school, following kindergarten (JI) attendance or traditional (T) pre-schooling.

Grade	<b>Graduation rate</b>		<b>Gross repeat rate</b>		Net repeat rate		Dropout rate	
	JI	Т	JI	Т	JI	Т	JI	Т
First	86.3	77.1	12.5	16.2	0	0	1.1	6.5
Second	83.3	75.0	16.6	21.6	0	0	0	3.3
Third	50.0	78.2	50.0	13.0	0	0	0	8.6
Average	73.2	76.8	26.3	16.9	0	0	0.3	6.2



Indigenous children and teacher in Nebaj, Guatemala, preparing a play based on a traditional story

The programme's final assessment, carried out in late 2004 by Del Valle University, showed that the two aspects that most affected attendance levels at both kindergarten and primary school were the bilingual character of the education and the fact that it was provided by local teachers (who were nonetheless recognised by MINEDUC).

Other key determinants of the programme's success were the community's active participation, the use of play activities to stimulate reading and writing abilities and the development of logical thinking, the use of appropriate local teaching materials and the follow-up provided to classroom activities by the technical team. Last but by no means least came teachers' commitment to their classrooms and to their communities.

#### **Efforts continue**

APEDIBIMI will continue contributing to children's education in the above ways until the programme

achieves its goal of full recognition of this type of activity as a priority in MINEDUC's policy framework. While bilingual education will continue to be a central component of the programme, APEDIMIMI will also pay attention to the promotion of children's rights and duties, and to the encouragement of community participation. Our experience has shown that the APEDIBIMI approach is the way to ensure an easy transition from early childhood to primary school.

## From pre-school to school in Poland Experience of the Comenius Foundation for Child Development

Teresa Ogrodzińska, President, Comenius Foundation for Child Development

Children in Poland begin their compulsory schooling at the beginning of the school year when they attain the age of 7. There is no compulsory pre-school education for children under 5, but local authorities have taken responsiblity for running early childhood education programmes. However, faced with a difficult economic situation after the political changes of 1989, many local authorities closed them down without providing an alternative. The situation is especially serious in rural areas.

In the 2004–05 school year, only 35 percent of 3- to 5-year-olds attended pre-school (in rural areas the rate is 15 percent). In September 2004, a law was enacted requiring every 6-year-old child to complete one year pre-school preparatory class, either in a kindergarten or in a pre-school establishment based at a primary school. The ongoing debate is whether children aged 3 to 5 should also, by law, attend pre-school education (it is currently at parents' discretion).

To improve the situation, since 2003 the Comenius Foundation, with support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, has been implementing the programme "Where there are no pre-schools" (WTANP) in cooperation with rural municipalities. The aim is to provide educational and child development activities for children in these areas. The programme helps establish educational centres for 3- to 6-year-olds in small towns and villages where there are no pre-schools. The centres are open several days a week, providing specific hours of educational activities. The curriculum focuses on children's self-esteem, self-reliance, curiosity and

social skills. Parents assist in running the centres and its activities.

After three years we asked for feedback from the teachers of the one-year pre-school preparatory class (for 6-year-olds) and the first class of primary school, on how the educational-centre children cope with a classroom situation. The results showed that the children were well prepared for learning at school, but that not all teachers were happy with these children. Some considered them troublemakers who interrupt the lesson. It turns out that these children are very curious, asking many questions. They also prefer working in groups and get easily bored during 'traditional' classes during which children have to listen and follow teachers' instructions. In addition, we received worrying feedback from some parents: children who had done well in the WTANP centres did not want to attend one-year pre-school preparatory class and some of them suffered from school neurosis (with symptoms such as stomach aches, vomiting and crying). The conclusion was that there was a problem of transition from preschool to the 0 class to primary school, so we decided to focus on this.

#### **Barriers to effective transition**

In Poland, not enough significance is attached to the subject of transition. Even proper pedagogic terminology is lacking. Although each kindergarten is obliged to follow a programme to help children adapt to pre-school, it applies only to children who enter the kindergarten at age 3. These programmes are adequate for new pre-school groups but not

for individual children. In most cases, adaptation is treated as a formal requirement and is limited to one meeting with parents and one or two visits by the child to the kindergarten in June before the child starts school (September) and parent-teacher meetings at the beginning of the school year.

There are several barriers to the process of helping children to adapt to school:

- low awareness of the significance of early childhood education, resulting from ignorance of the importance of early childhood and its influence on the future education and life of children;
- lackof national debate on children's education and development. University courses in teacher training do not include international networking and thus are not sufficiently open to new methodologies and trends. A conservative approach to teacher training does not prepare future teachers and educators for cooperation with parents, an important element in the transition process;
- lackof continuity between different levels of education. Pre-school teachers and teachers of classes 1, 2 and 3 do not cooperate, but work separately. There are no mechanisms for them to develop educational and developmental strategies together;
- lackof partnership between teachers and parents. There are no mechanisms for parents to give their perspectives when developing educational programmes.

#### **Practical solutions**

In order to learn more on the subject of transitions, we collaborated with Dr Anna Kienig of the University of Białystok. Dr Kienig in one of the few academics in Poland specialising in transitions. We also joined the Special Interest Group on Transition, affiliated with the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA), which enabled us to see our Polish challenges from an international perspective and to collect information on the latest developments on the transition process.

We established a team of trainers and experts from the Comenius Foundation's partner organisations: the Adults for Children Association, the Astrid Lindgren Young Child Institute, and the Comenius Academy. The team developed a three-day training programme, "Successful transition to school", and prepared educational materials, targeted at pre-school teachers and educators (including those in WTANP educational centres) and teachers of the 0, 1, 2 and 3 classes.

The long-term goal of the programme is to build local coalitions for developing suitable conditions for the transition from pre-school to school. Shortterm objectives include the development of teachers' knowledge and skills on the process of transition and adaptation; the development of cooperation between pre-schools and schools for successful transition and adaptation; and the preparation of teachers to develop programmes of transition in cooperation with parents.

The pilot training has been conducted in seven rural municipalities. One hundred and forty-nine educators and teachers working in the WTANP Educational Centres, pre-schools, 0 classes and primary classes 1, 2 and 3 participated in eight training sessions.

The pilot training showed there is a genuine need for such a programme, particularly for establishing cooperation between teachers from pre-school up to class 3. The teachers did not perceive the subject as cooperation between pre-school and school for the benefit of the children, but rather saw it as related to the process of adaptation and its associated difficulties. Typical for almost all training sessions was a tension between pre-school and primary school teachers, resulting from the common belief in Poland that the function of pre-school is to provide care for children, whereas 'real' education starts only at school. It took much of the trainers' time and effort to encourage participants to cooperate on developing joint programmes for creating a friendly environment for transition and adaptation.

The training revealed that the teachers significantly lack the skills necessary for cooperation with parents and are even reluctant to do this. It also disclosed a lack of knowledge among the teachers on the transition process. The questionnaire at the end of the programme included the following answers to the question: What was the most surprising thing during the workshops?

 what the child really feels about coming to school after attending pre-school;



The training helped teachers to become aware of the process of adaptation - what the child feels and imagines

- that the child encounters so many difficulties in the process of adaptation;
- that it is possible to use pre-school methods at school;
- that it is so difficult for the child to adapt to school after the 0 class.

There was also very positive feedback from the teachers who found the content relevant for their school/pre-school work and highly valued the educational materials. On the topic of what the participants gained from the workshops, teachers mentioned as most important:

- learning new ways of working with parents;
- becoming aware of the process of adaptation what the child feels and imagines;
- knowledge about the adaptation process and the behaviour of child and parent during the transition period;
- understanding the differences and similarities between school and pre-school.

The result of the training is 13 transition programmes developed by the participants, all assuming cooperation between school and preschool teachers and parents. Feedback from the teachers is optimistic. They began to implement the transition programmes through consultation with parents who, asked for their opinions the first time, were surprised and shy, but soon proposed new transition activities for children.

The implementation of the transition programmes will be monitored. The "Successful transition to school" training is included in the teacher inservice programme of the Comenius Academy. We now plan to train the teachers working in the municipalities and implementing the WTANP programmes.

We have also started a new training module which will include a project approach to the transition process as well as the active participation of parents. As other countries are also interested in the issue of transition, we have invited the following organisations to be our partners on this training programme: the Early Years Organisation (NIPPA) in Great Britain; the Society for the Development and Creative Occupation of Children (EADAP) in Greece; Unia Materskych Centier in Slovakia; and Český výbor Světové organizace pro předškolní výchovu (OMEP) in the Czech Republic.

## School transition in rural northeast Brazil The 'Parques Infantis' programme

Luzia Torres Gerosa, General Manager of IFAN1, and Vanessa Maia Girâo Brito, Coordinator of IFAN's Rural Childhood Programme

For children in the rural areas<sup>2</sup> of northeast Brazil, the transition to school is context-specific. Unlike their counterparts in towns and cities, rural children tend to be well-acquainted with their teachers, school director and the school premises. This familiarity is largely due to the fact that the majority of teachers live in the local community. Teachers tend to be their pupils' neighbours and are wellknown to the children's parents.

School dynamics – timetables, regulations, learning materials, snacks and so on - are also familiar to rural children. Their siblings and friends attend the same school and share daily experiences with them.

According to 2005 figures provided by Ceará State's Secretary of Education, 98 percent of children of compulsory school age (7 years) attend school - whether in rural or urban areas of the State, whether in a morning or afternoon four-hour session. IFAN's experience in northeast Brazil shows that several systemic factors specific to rural areas make school access, the transition to school life and continued class attendance easier for children. Amongst the most significant are the existence of a municipal public schools network (for primary education) within major rural communities; daily school transport that is free and available to children in the most remote rural locations; a daily snack programme for all pupils; and a federal programme which provides financial support to the poorest families as long as they keep their children in school.

However, curriculum is certainly another major factor to be considered in any analysis of the rural school transition. The Federal Law on Base Guidelines for Education (LDB 9394/96) establishes a common new curriculum for all schools in Brazil. This same law nevertheless gives autonomy to the schools and school boards in the development and procurement of specific pedagogical contents reflecting local social and cultural realities. This includes purchases of school books with such content and the organisation of pedagogical and innovative local programmes.

Theoretically, the LDB 9394/96 is a flexible and modern pedagogical framework. In practice, however, children from rural areas face a series of challenges related to the current structure and institutional culture of the school. Specifically, there is an implicit assumption by rural school teachers that pupils and their families must adapt to school demands and needs. This assumption is reflected in a set of daily realities during pupil transition. First, children's school readiness is directly linked to their chronological age rather than to their learning capacity or cultural background. Second, curricular activities are monotonous, with complex contents, and do not take into account children's limited ability to focus and reflect on abstract concepts. Third, school learning assessments focus strictly on cognitive abilities, ignoring the value of children's emotional, social and cultural abilities. And finally, school results are associated with a hierarchy of knowledge defined by the school and not by the interests and choices of the child. Teacher-pupil interaction is based on rigid discipline; it does not allow the child to negotiate or participate actively in the selection of new areas of learning.

#### School success: Whose responsibility?

Teachers generally admit that most parents in rural areas have a low level of education and face daily

family hardships. Underemployment, poverty, alcoholism among men, and doubly long working hours for women - all of these make it difficult for families to follow their children's school careers. Nevertheless, teachers see family members as responsible for children's success or failure at school.

Family acceptance of this role is explained by the fact that poor rural families tend to see the school as a symbol of absolute authority. This perception generates an asymmetric power relationship between teachers and families. It becomes difficult, and in many cases impossible, for the family to be able to make demands on the educational system and to participate in school dynamics.

Finally, IFAN has observed that a large proportion of pupils, having spent several years in the same grade or in special remedial teaching programmes, have not yet made significant cognitive and social progress. This situation creates a negative image of the child within the school and family community, and undermines her or his self-confidence and motivation to continue learning. Additionally, families have a fear of losing the economic benefits they receive from federal support programmes, which are always conditioned on children's continuing attendance to school.

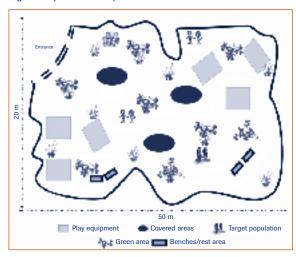
#### The Parques Infantis programme

The lessons learned by IFAN in its work on children's transitions inspired a reorientation of the Parques Infantis ('Children's Outdoors') programme in 2006. This programme is one of five components of a micro-regional intervention (PIRN) carried out by IFAN in the Macico de Baturite, in Ceará State.

Currently, the Parques Infantis programme is operating in the municipalities of Ocara, Mulungu and Itapiuna, with a total participation of 619 children and youth. One of their goals is to contribute to the development of a municipal policy on early childhood education and development.

By Parque Infantil, IFAN understands a physical space primarily for children but which also includes other social and demographic groups such as youth and adults. This well-defined

Figure: Layout of a Parque Infantil



physical space (see Figure) is managed by a local technical team, implementing a methodological framework supported by specific material resources. The team's long-term objective is to formulate a Rural Children's Agenda<sup>3</sup>. The Parques Infantis programme is a shared initiative of children, the community and municipal authorities.

#### The 'Parques Infantis' concept

IFAN developed the concept of Parques Infantis based on the following: (a) an analysis of childhood inspired by the Sociology of Childhood paradigm<sup>4</sup>, especially with regards to its four dimensions<sup>5</sup>; (b) a perception of children's cultures based on their own group interpretative reproductions<sup>6</sup>; (c) an analysis of Parques Infantis inspired by the pioneering work of Mario de Andrade<sup>7</sup>, and defined by him as "a project for early childhood education", aiming to stimulate children's different cultural manifestations and assuring their right to "be children"; (d) a methodological proposal for early childhood education based on the flexible curricular components of the LDB 9394/96, which allows the integration of various forms of artistic expression (such as music, painting and drama) with bodily expression (physical and social) and linguistics (oral and written), according to a specific social reality.

The Parques Infantis programme is one of the first transitional experiences of poor rural children (3-6 years old) in the region. It is designed as a

developmental learning experience, able to support and prepare children for their transition to school life.

The key components of the programme are:

- 1. Child participation. Through play, children learn to negotiate their activities with other children, with the technical team of adolescents working in the Parques Infantis programme, and with their parents.
- 2. *Interpreting adult culture*. The programme also seeks to stimulate children to develop their own 'interpretative reproduction' of adult cultures through a series of art-related activities. The aim is to help children develop their own identity, which in turn allows them to make better use of educational opportunities when they enter the school cycle.
- 3. Participative co-management. The technical team (teenagers), parents and municipal authorities are in charge of the material maintenance and management of the Parques Infantis programme. The aim is to allow poor rural families to gain experience in negotiating with local authorities and to be able to confront new situations, at the same time ensuring the economic and material sustainability of the programme.
- 4. Leisure activities complementary to the school curriculum. The programme 'La hora do jogo' (for children aged 7-12) includes activities such as reading, writing, logical thinking and arts, all intended to promote the success of children in school. This is a common point of interest for the children, their parents, teachers, municipal education authorities and IFAN itself. While the Parques Infantis programme does not position itself as an alternative to schools, it does seek to inspire rural school teachers with regard to the opportunities offered by LDB 9394/96. In order to ensure this, the programme provides training for their technical teams (adolescents), especially in new pedagogical techniques. The teams then disseminate, by way of example, the new practices among young teachers.
- 5. Promoting children's rights. Community action is helping to promote awareness of children's rights among the rural population. There are plans to form sectoral stakeholder groups that will formulate the future Rural Children's Agenda, as a guide to municipal action in the areas of education, social services and health.

#### **Future challenges**

The current school model offers few opportunities for either children or their families to exert any influence over it. School transition programmes therefore need to create municipal inter-sectoral strategies with the aim of setting in motion a 'contextualisation' process among rural schools a process that questions the dominant paradigm, namely that success in school is the sole responsibility of pupils and their families.

The Parques Infantis programme brings together children and their families in small rural communities where there are no schools. It is becoming an integrating factor in the region. The programme is helping to create a common identity among children, through shared play and cultural activities among peers, teenagers and adults. One can only assume that these children will, some time down the road, meet again at the same school. The project's challenge is to verify whether children's school readiness and performance are enhanced. Project implementation will provide the answers.

#### Notes

- 1 IFAN stands for the *Instituto da Infância*, the Childhood Institute. Located in northeast Brazil, IFAN is a not-for-profit association that generates new knowledge on childhood issues, both through lessons learned from the practice and through innovative paradigms about childhood. Its aim is to contribute to the design of new social technologies focused on childhood and to promote new public policies at the municipal level. Established in 1999, IFAN is headquartered in Fortaleza, Ceará State.
- Childhood is that biological period in the life of a human being, socially defined as a child. Rural childhood refers to that early period when life habits and learning are permeated by the rural family's economic activity, such as food-crop production, herding or silviculture (IFAN, 2005: Institutional Strategic Planning).
- The Rural Children's Agenda is a holistic policy approach that departs from the concept of rural children as active social actors. The expected Agenda will define strategic areas for child well-being to be addressed by municipal intervention. It is inspired by New Zealand's Agenda for Children: Making Life Better for Children, 2002 (IFAN, 2005: Institutional Strategic
- 4 This term refers to a new perspective in the field of

- childhood studies. It understands childhood as a 'social category', which varies according to the historical moment and social context. This paradigm questions the existence of a unique childhood concept with a universal character. J. Goddard et al. (2005). *The Politics of Childhood*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 188-189.
- 5 The four childhood dimensions are: a) childhood as an age group; b) childhood institutional arrangements; c) inter-generational relations; and d) relations among children. Patricia Adler and Peter Adler (2003). *Peer Power*, Rutgers University Press, p.11-16.
- 6 The concept of 'interpretative reproduction' refers to the collective participation of children in the appropriation of adult cultures, its collective re-creation by children's peers groups and its reproduction and change in wider adult society. W. Corsaro (2005). *The Sociology of Childhood*, Pine Forge Press, p. 26.
- 7 Brazilian writer and pioneer of Parques Infantis concept during his period as Municipal Secretary of Culture in the city of Sao Paulo (1935–1938).

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# A case study from Israel How children, schools and parents can successfully address developmental difficulties

The Centre for Learning Competence<sup>1</sup>, Israel, with Bernard van Leer Foundation programme staff

Five-year-old Anat has a problem with eye-hand coordination: she cannot easily keep her eye on the point where her pencil meets the paper. Anat therefore cannot make the upwards and downwards strokes required for her writing exercises. She soon gives up trying and distracts the children around her.

Anat's teacher thinks her pupil needs to practise her writing until she gets it right, and keeps Anat in class when the other children go out to play. This also serves as punishment for having distracted the other children. On Anat's return from school, her mother anxiously puts her to work on writing exercises. Anat yells that she hates writing and hates school and tears up her book. As punishment, she is not allowed out to play. She knocks down a vase in protest and it breaks. When Anat's father comes home to find that a valuable vase is broken, he shouts that Anat's mother is a poor parent and blames her for Anat's poor performance in school.

The problem is now much more than the issue of Anat's eye-hand coordination. A relatively minor developmental difficulty has blown up into a learning disability, behavioural difficulties and family conflict.

Unfortunately, this is a common story among young children today.

Suppose that Anat's developmental difficulty had been identified accurately and early on, and

addressed in a different way. Suppose that Anat had been encouraged to gradually strengthen her eye movements, improve feedback from muscles and joints, and regulate her muscle-tone (all contributing to her eye-hand coordination) through enjoyable play activities, both inside the kindergarten and in the playground, along with other children from her kindergarten. And suppose that writing exercises had been introduced slowly as coordination improved? Similarly, suppose that Anat's parents had been gently informed about the coordination problem and encouraged to help her through play at home.

If all this had happened, Anat would have had much greater chances of going to school with a positive attitude to learning, shared by her parents, instead of falling into the negative spiral just described.

This second approach is taken by the Centre for Learning Competence (CLC) in Israel. The Centre's director, a developmental psychologist, worked out this approach through decades of therapeutic work with children with learning or behavioural problems. The Centre identifies the underlying developmental difficulty around which psychological, social and family problems have accrued. Once it is effectively addressed, a child's academic and social problems are dramatically reduced.

The CLC has attempted over the years to extend the benefits of its approach beyond those children whose parents can afford to pay. Some municipalities in Israel have funded the programme within schools and kindergartens, but these tend to be in the more affluent cities. Even there, support for the programme is vulnerable to political shifts and budget cuts.

In 2005, the CLC and the Bernard van Leer Foundation began a three-year collaboration to enable disadvantaged young children in the cities of Haifa, Netanya and Rishon-Lezion to begin their school education within a climate conducive to the natural development of children's minds and bodies.

The programme is oriented to kindergartens because these are generally the first formal education environments, acting as stepping stones to school. The CLC also has programmes for children younger than kindergarten age and for school children. But the Foundation chose kindergarten as a strategic point to exert a strong positive influence on a child's transition to school.

The collaborative programme is called "Children-Friendly Kindergartens". This is shorthand for saying that the kindergartens operate in ways that allow children to develop skills and abilities, rather than imposing the developmental norms that adults consider desirable.

The approach questions the conventional distinction between education for 'normal' children and special education for children with disabilities. It recognises that children acquire abilities at different rates and that most children need support in developing particular abilities. If this support is provided at the right time, in the right way, many children who would otherwise have been called 'disabled' can remain in mainstream environments



The Centre for Learning Competence aims to create early learning environments that pre-empt the emergence of developmental difficulties and encourage every child to flourish

with 'normal' children. The CLC provides effective therapy for children diagnosed with developmental difficulties; but it prefers to create early learning environments that pre-empt the emergence of developmental difficulties and encourage every child to flourish.

#### Distinctive features of children-friendly kindergartens

Teachers and assistants have acquired knowledge and skills (in addition to those in conventional teacher training) through a special in-service course provided by the CLC. Kindergarten teachers and assistants initially learn how children develop various sensory-motor abilities, and later how to spot a child having trouble and how to support her effectively. In Anat's case, her teacher would have been taught about the ways in which eye-hand coordination develop and how a child's difficulty with this skill may be associated with behavioural problems. Instead of aggravating Anat's difficulty with writing exercises and punishments, the teacher would have helped her to strengthen the basic functions that underlie coordination through enjoyable play routines.

Kindergarten staff receive regular back-up from the CLC and from a local coordinator (see below). They also share experiences, learning from each other. Teachers and assistants appear purposefully and happily engaged. Rather than struggling with the symptoms of problems, they directly and successfully address the problems at their roots, with professional support.

When the programme is working well, the atmosphere in a child-friendly kindergarten is striking. Visitors notice the wide range of activities on offer and how purposefully engaged the children are in these activities. Noise levels are generally low not because of authoritarian discipline but because children are happily occupied in play (and learning).

Parents seem happier too. They no longer come to collect their children with the dread of complaints from the staff and from a wailing child. Instead, they participate in discussions about their child's on-going progress. Special workshops inform parents about the Centre's approach. It is hoped that they will extend this knowledge to their other children as well.

Finally, the children acquire a problem-solving approach to developmental difficulties. Anat now understands why, compared with most of her classmates, it takes more time for her to move a pencil along the page as directed, and she can see that this is getting easier. Her classmates report to their parents that Anat did three clear lines today, rather than that Anat is stupid or naughty.

In a conventional setting, a dyslexic child is defined as having difficulties in attaining a functional level of reading, despite usual teaching methods, even though the child is not mentally disabled, blind, deaf or incapacitated in any other way, and does not come from a severely disadvantaged social or family background.

The CLC would never tell a parent that his or her child is dyslexic, knowing that this may evoke negative emotions undermining the parent's ability to fully support the child. The blanket term 'dyslexia' (with the attendant stigma) is avoided, and the precise developmental difficulty is identified, along with the required response.

For example, one child has difficulty reading because he cannot easily distinguish between sounds.

A second cannot read because her eye movements are jerky. A third child is visually sensitive to the contrast between dark print and white paper, and shies away from looking at printed pages. And a fourth cannot remember the link between the letter and the sound.

All four children can successfully and happily learn to read once the developmental difficulty is addressed, through fun activities rather than irksome corrections, and with sensitive guidance from adults at school and at home.

The basic developmental functions addressed by the CLC determine not only learning issues, but children's social and emotional responses, communication and language abilities, and more. The collaborative project tries to anchor this approach in mainstream education through a local coordinator who has received extensive training in the CLC's approach, attached to the municipal department of education. The coordinator is usually a former kindergarten teacher well-suited to supporting teachers in Children-Friendly Kindergartens.

#### Note

1 The Centre for Learning Competence is an abbreviation of the organisation's full name "Learning Competence – the Centre for the Advancement of Functional Capacities".

The Centre for Learning Competence <www. kishurei-lemida.com> believes that educational settings, especially in the early years, should:

- be receptive of each and every child, and encourage every child to flourish;
- provide a learning environment that responds to and stimulates children's different abilities;
- avoid labels such as 'dyslexic' and 'hyperactive' and the associated stigma;
- identify a child's developmental and functional difficulties as early as possible and address them promptly, effectively and pleasantly, within the everyday environment;
- equip educators and parents with the skills to fully support children's development.

# Further reading

#### **Education for All - Global Monitoring Report 2007**

The Education for All Global Monitoring Report is the prime instrument to assess global progress towards achieving the six 'Dakar' EFA goals to which over 160 countries committed themselves in 2000

Early childhood care and education is the special theme of this year's report.

www.efareport.unesco.org

#### Transitions in early childhood

This website was established in 2001 following the EECERA (European Early Childhood Education Research Association) Conference in London, August 2000. It provides a directory of research about the different transitions children face in their early years, including transitions from parental to non-parental care; from home-based care to centre-based care; within early childhood services; from home to pre-school; from preschool to the first year of schooling.

http://extranet.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/tec

### Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). September 2006

This review outlines the progress made by the participating countries in responding to the key aspects of successful ECEC policy outlined in the previous volume, Starting Strong (OECD, 2001). It offers many examples of new policy initiatives adopted in the ECEC field. In their conclusion, the authors identify ten policy areas for further critical attention from governments. The book also presents country profiles which give an overview of ECEC systems in all 20 participating countries.

www.oecd.org/document/63/0,2340,en\_2649\_ 33925\_37416703\_1\_1\_1\_1,00.html

#### The transition to kindergarten: A review of current research and promising practices to involve families

M. Bohan-Baker and P.M.D. Little. Harvard Family Research Project. 2002

This report is based on a review of current research conducted by the Harvard Family Research Project on the transition to kindergarten, focusing on promising transition practices and the role that schools might play in their implementation. This brief offers a synthesis of our findings, focusing on the important role that families play in transition to kindergarten.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp

#### id21 insights education no 5 Mother tongue first: Children's right to learn in their own language. September 2006

Education is power and language is the key to accessing that power. A child who thrives at school and develops self-esteem and pride will have better employment opportunities and is more likely to realf his or her potential. Ethnicity, language and culture are deeply intertwined. They are also intertwined with inequity, discrimination and conflict. Since most countries in the world are multiethnic and multilingual, opinions about provision of education, curriculum content, and the language of teaching and learning are often fiercely held and hotly debated.

www.id21.org/insights/insights-ed05

#### **IIEP Newsletter**

International Institute for Educational Planning, Vol. XXIV, Nº 1, January-March 2006

This issue contains a section addressing early childhood education and some articles on transitions.

www.unesco.org/iiep/eng/newsletter/2006/jane06.

#### Non-formal education and basic education reform: a conceptual review

W. Hoppers, International Institute for Educational Planning. UNESCO. 2006

The author addresses the complex linkages between formal and non-formal education, and the value of some types of non-formal education for improving the quality and relevance of basic education. He challenges the reader on means of using policy, planning and action-oriented research to move towards integration, equity and diversity.

www.unesco.org/iiep/PDF/pubs/K16.pdf

#### I compagni: Understanding children's transition from pre-school to elementary school

W.A. Corsaro and L. Molinari, Sociology of Education Series, Teachers College, Columbia University. 2005

What happens when children in creative, Reggio-like pre-schools go to a more traditional elementary school? In this book, the authors tell a complete and important story about the lives of children as they grow from young pre-schoolers to preadolescents in Modena, Italy. The authors both fully explore and participate in the rich, complex history and development of the Italian early education system.

http://store.tcpress.com/0807746185.shtml

#### Transitions in the early years: Debating continuity and progression for children in early education Edited by H. Fabian and A.W. Dunlop. Routledge.

By the time young children enter statutory education, they may have already attended a number of different educational settings, from entry to group settings outside home, to joining playgroup or nursery school. Each of these experiences is likely to affect children's capacity to adjust and to learn. This book focuses on children's experiences of personal and curricular transitions in early childhood. The authors are all academics with international reputations in the field of early childhood education. They draw on their research in Europe, Australia and the USA.

#### **Transitions**

European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, Themed Monograph Series No 1 European Early Childhood Education Research Association. University College Worcester. 2003

The articles in this monograph all focus on the common issue of transitions, but each takes a particular aspect. The first six all focus on the transition to school, and three other papers offer perspectives on three different types of transition.

www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/tec

#### What can universal prekindergarten learn from special education

D. Bailey, Foundation for Child Development. 2002 Universal pre-kindergarten refers to the goal of making available to families of all 3-and 4-yearolds a programme of services that provides highquality education for children and helps prepare them for a successful entry to kindergarten. Although many factors have contributed to current efforts to advocate for this goal, two stand out as especially important. First, many children today, perhaps as many as 40 percent, enter kindergarten not ready to succeed with the types of activities and expectations typically offered by schools. The transition to kindergarten is a formative period in shaping a child's later success in school, but it is unlikely that changing the entry process alone will correct this problem. Only a sustained and comprehensive programme of services during the pre-school period can hope to alter trajectories in a way that significantly improves the odds of success.

www.ffcd.org

#### ChildreN7

The first Transition; From Home to Early Childhood Service, Starting childcare before three, Quality in Homebased Care. Vol 4 No. 1. Children's Issues Centre, University of Otago. 2000

Articles published in this issue are concerned with transition; when should it occur, what should be the goals of society, parents and educators, what kind of childcare, and how should this occur?

#### www.otago.ac.nz/CIC

## A conceptual framework for understanding children as agents in the transition from home to kindergarten

Mai Seung Lam and A. Pollard. Early Years Vol. 26. 2, July 2006. Routledge

This paper aims to provide early childhood education professionals with a framework to understand children as agents in the transition from home to kindergarten. This paper begins with a review of the concept of transition. It then presents a conceptual framework of the understanding of children as agents in the transition from home to kindergarten. Major elements of the conceptual framework are derived from sociocultural theory, and analyses of 'rites of passage' and 'pupil career'. This highlights the relationships between layers of context, stages of transition, and adaptation outcomes.

http://ejournals.ebsco.com/Article.asp?ContributionID=9253463

## Successful kindergarten transition: Your guide to connecting children, families, & schools

Robert Pianta and Marcia Kraft-Sayre NAEYC, 2003

This practical guide is built around a model that has been adopted in many diverse schools and communities. Step by step, the book helps professionals and caregivers develop a solid transition plan, implement the plan, and stay motivated and inspired.

http://sales.naeyc.org/Itemdetail.aspx?Stock\_No=134&Category=

#### **Pre-school Education and School Completion**

A.J. Reynolds and Suh-Ruu Ou. Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development. 2004

Pre-school education programmes were implemented in the United States more than four decades ago. The goal of such programmes is to enhance the school readiness of childrenat-risk due to primarily economic disadvantage,

so they can begin formal schooling on a more equal footing with their peers. Findings since the 1960s have indicated that pre-school programmes can enhance children's cognitive skills, literacy and social skills necessary for school success, as well as promoting school achievement in the elementary grades, reducing the need for special education and grade retention, reducing the risk of delinquency and increasing levels of educational attainment. This review will focus on the connection between pre-school participation and measures of school completion in the published literature.

www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca

## Coping with cultural transition: A framework fo studying minority parents and children in Israel

D. Roer-Strier. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, Vol. 6, nr. 2, 1998. Worcester. EECERA

Addresses the multivariate nature of research on minority children and families in Israel. An ecological approach toward the study of child development. Looks on wider social and cultural contexts and on interactions at all levels.

www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/tec

# What's the difference? The impact of early childhood development programmes. A study from Nepal on the effects for children, their families and communities

Save the Children USA. 2003

This report describes an early childhood programme in Nepal and the dramatic effects it has had over just a few years. Not only for young children, but also for their families and communities. It looks in particular at the impact the programme has had on children's transition to school, a significant issue in a country where many children never start school and where those who do start drop out in large numbers during the first year.

www.savethechildren.org/countries/asia/nepal.asp

#### Early childhood care and development: A positive impact. A study from Myanmar of the effects for children, their families and communities

Save the Children Federation, 2005

This study examines the impact of an ECCD programme on children, their families and communities in rural Myanmar in 19 communities in two different regions where SCF US has been supporting ECCD programmes. The study demonstrates the impact of the programmes, especially on the transition to primary school and further reinforces the importance of and need to expand quality ECCD services.

www.savethechildren.org/countries/asia/ myanmar.asp

#### Transition to the school playground; an intervention programme for nursery children

N. Smith. Early Years Vol. 22, nr. 2, July 2002. Tactyc / Routledge

This paper presents selective findings based on practitioner action research. The focus is the transition from nursery playground to the school playground of nursery children. The findings reveal that process and connectivity of the programme promoted a sense of belonging in which the children reciprocally nurtured each other, acknowledged and recognised feelings and formed friendships so that when they started school they became more resilient within the school playground. The findings also highlight areas of vulnerability which need to be addressed concerning school routines and very young children.

www.tactyc.org.uk/earlyyears.asp

#### Enhancing transition from early childhood phase to primary education: evidence from the research literature

D. Achanfuo Yeboah. Early Years Vol. 22, nr. 1 p 51-68. Routledge. 2002

This article examines the literature on transition to school, and discusses its importance and the need to minimise its adverse effects by providing a smooth transition for the child. The article

presents the factors which impact on successful transition from the early childhood phase to primary school.

www.ingentaconnect.com/content/routledg/ceye/ 2002/00000022/00000001/art00006

## News from the Foundation

#### **Recent publications**

Early Childhood Matters 106. Violence against young children: A painful issue

Espacio para la Infancia 25. Violencia contra los niños pequeños: Un tema espinoso

The June edition of the Foundation's twice-yearly Early Childhood Matters (Spanish: Espacio para la Infancia) features interviews and articles covering such issues as corporal punishment, child abuse, conflict resolution, and violence in schools (ISSN 1387-9553, 50 pages; Spanish ISSN 1387-6476, 51 pages).

#### **Forthcoming**

Working Paper 40. Respect for diversity: An international overview. By Glenda Mac Naughton

This working paper provides an overview on ways of thinking about young children's respect for diversity. The report identifies significant issues, including gaps in knowledge. The paper first describes, in Section I, the influential sources of knowledge about four different kinds of diversity in young children's lives: cultural and racial diversity, developmental diversity, gender diversity and socioeconomic diversity.

The paper then describes and analyses, in Section II, five broad schools of thought that have provided the key conceptual foundations of respect for diversity pedagogies and practices. The five schools of thought are the laissez-faire school (aiming to produce equity for everyone within existing social structures and attitudes), the special provisions school (aiming to equalise educational opportunity for children and groups that are considered different from the 'norm' by teaching them to succeed within the mainstream), the cultural understandings school (aiming to create understanding among diverse groups of children), the equal opportunities school aiming to give everyone, irrespective of differences, an equal opportunity to succeed within existing social structures and attitudes) and the anti-discrimination school (aiming to create equal outcomes by challenging inequities and injustices).

The paper maps each school of thought in terms of its characteristic perspectives on the best methods

for understanding and engaging with diversity in young children's lives. Appendix 1 describes two emerging theoretical lines of inquiry in respect for diversity. Appendix 2 identifies key centres of expertise on issues in respect for diversity in early childhood.

#### **New Programme Managers appointed**

The Foundation is very pleased to announce it has appointed Jacqueline Hayden Programme Manager for the newly established programme area "Social Inclusion/Respect for Diversity". Dr Hayden has worked in the development of early childhood programs at local, state and national levels within several continents. She is author of numerous publications on cross cultural issues in early childhood education, service and program development, health promotion and policy analyses. Most recently she was Director of Child and Youth Studies and Professor at the Research Centre for Social Justice and Social Change, University of Western Sydney, Australia.

We also welcome Luis Pereira, who has been named Programme Manager for the new "Strengthening the Care Environment" programme area. Mr Pereira's life ambition is to protect, promote and realise international human rights and the rights of children in particular. Of Indian nationality, he holds a Masters degree in International Relations (Fletcher School, Tufts University) and has over 20 years experience in child-focussed development in Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa.

#### **Bernard van Leer Foundation**

Investing in the development of young children

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have

built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

- Through "Strengthening the Care Environment" we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable parents, families and communities to care for their children.
- Through "Successful Transitions" we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school.
- Through "Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity" we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

