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**Early childhood education:
questions of quality**

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Editorial

The number 77 million has often been emphasised in the mid-term progress reports on Education For All goals. As we pass the halfway point between the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and the year – 2015 – by when all children are supposed to have free primary education, 77 million is how many of the world's children are still not in school.

But this emphasis risks distracting us from a fundamental concern: if those 77 million children could be made to attend school for five years, how many would nonetheless still be functionally illiterate at the end of it? It has become increasingly clear since 2000 that the goal of universal primary education may not be as meaningful as originally assumed: when primary education is not of adequate quality, to make it universal is not only pointless but a waste of money.

The question of quality as children make the transition from their homes to primary education therefore runs through this edition of *Early Childhood Matters*.

We believe that a more significant number is 800 million – that's the approximate number of the world's adults who are not functionally literate. Why? Because many of those illiterate adults are the mothers of young children. They include many of the 77 million who aren't in school, and also many of the much larger number of young children – around 200 million – who may be in school but whose overall development is still assessed as being seriously at risk.

Even when at-risk children do get a free place at primary school, they are held back if they have not been exposed to literacy in the home in early childhood. The extent to which children benefit from education depends greatly on how engaged and supportive their parents are, and that intergenerational support is more likely to be lacking when parents do not themselves have a basic education – it is harder to expect parents to support

the development of literacy in their children when they are not themselves literate. Work with parents is therefore a recurring theme in this edition of *Early Childhood Matters*.

Another key message of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's Transitions programme is, of course, that one of the very best ways to ensure that primary schooling isn't a waste of children's time and public money is to invest in quality early childhood programmes.

We are happy to observe that this point is increasingly widely acknowledged. But we are continually frustrated that it is still very little reflected where it really counts – in terms of money going into early childhood education. Although the Education For All Global Monitoring Report last year was on the subject of early childhood, there is relatively little attention paid to it in this year's mid-term stocktaking report. More importantly, when you look at the money being channelled through the Fast Track Initiative – showing which developing-country plans are getting priority funding from the donor community – you find relatively little attention to pre-school programmes.

This edition of *Early Childhood Matters* seeks to focus attention on how quality early childhood programmes can lay the foundations for quality primary education. The first article, by María Victoria Peralta, presents an overview of the complex topic of 'quality' in early childhood education: "the central problem is how to re-conceptualise educational quality taking into account diversity, subjectivity, the various views of the agents involved and the wide range of spatial and temporal contexts, without losing sight of the factors that guarantee a good educational experience" (p. 3).

Next we present an interview with Rosa María Torres, a specialist in basic education for children, young people and adults, in which she highlights the importance of "fully respecting the right to education, which implies the right to equal learning

opportunities for all, the right to learn and to learn how to learn, as an interesting and pleasurable activity, without ill-treatment, with affection, using the time, languages and methods required in each case” (p. 13).

While central to poverty reduction in the developing world, the quality of early childhood care and education is also becoming increasingly significant in developed countries as they reach a point where the majority of young children are being cared for outside the home. This is the question explored in depth by UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre’s Report Card 8, which suggests benchmarks for measuring the quality of early childhood education and care services in the OECD countries.

Early Childhood Matters talks to Eva Jespersen, Chief of Monitoring of Social and Economic Policies at Innocenti, about how she hopes the publication of the Report Card will help to shape the political agenda around early childhood issues (p. 20). We then summarise the main findings of the Report Card on p. 22.

To go into greater depth with an example from a developed country, we look at how the provision of early childhood has evolved over time in United Kingdom and the direction in which quality improvement efforts have developed (p. 25).

We then turn our attention involving parents in early childhood programmes as a prerequisite for a quality intervention in early education, especially for children and families who are normally left out of the system. Our first example here comes from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step is developing a project through a parent–school partnership with the aim of supporting success for Roma children (p. 31).

Using a similar strategy of building bridges between families and school, the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú is carrying out a project with indigenous communities in the Peru Amazon rainforest (p. 35). It seeks to increase enrolment and retention of children in early childhood education and primary school by improving both children’s capacities and quality of provision. Also on the theme of harnessing local solutions, the Monduli

Pastoralist Development Initiative is working to improve the quality of young Maasai children’s early care and education in Tanzania by taking the culture and knowledge of the Maasai people as an entry point (p. 39).

To improve quality in early childhood education is an especially challenging objective when financial resources are scarce to non-existent. In the following article (p. 44), Christina Peeters shares some practical ideas about how this can be attempted. Sharing ideas is also a focus of the penultimate article, which looks at how the impact of interventions can be multiplied by knowledge gathering and dissemination and policy advocacy (p. 47). The project carried out by the Organization of American States in Latin America is an example of how the foundation seeks to build alliances that are capable of bringing about positive changes for children.

The process of learning lessons from projects is greatly helped by adequate mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation, which is the topic of our final article (p. 49) – a look at the participatory qualitative methodology developed by the Popular Centre for Culture and Development, in which 12 project quality indicators are systematically applied by educators in their daily work.

It is not always easy to devise ways of measuring the quality of care and education for young children. The foundation will continue to seek ways of doing so at a project level while hoping that Report Card 8 will stimulate more ambition to make comparisons at a national level. But it is also important to keep firmly in mind that behind the benchmarks and statistics are children with rights and needs. Quality in care and education is important because it helps all children – especially those with low-income, minority or under-educated parents – to reach their potential, laying the long-term foundations for more productive and harmonious societies.

Editor: *Teresa Moreno*

Quality: Children's right to appropriate and relevant education

**María Victoria Peralta, Director of the International Children's Education Institute,
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Many global initiatives, including Education For All (EFA) launched in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 and reaffirmed in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, still regard quality as a topic of minor importance. Paradoxically, although it is a requirement subject to constant evaluation using efficiency parameters, it lacks sufficient technical and financial support for correct implementation.

This article attempts to highlight that to achieve quality, a theoretical position is needed from which a proper operating system can be developed. The discussion suggests that it is important to try to move forward towards a position that, regardless of whether it is termed postmodern, metamodern or simply more human, subscribes to a set of basic criteria and is open and flexible enough to include other parameters that take into account the history of each provision.

Theoretical issues and practical approaches

Quality is surely the most frequently occurring educational issue of concern to modern governments and societies. Paradoxically, it is one of the least developed topics in the literature, both conceptually and operationally. As early as 1968, Coombs indicated that it was the most 'slippery' term in education. More recently, authors such as Moss and Pence (1994) and Casassus (1999) stated that the concept has become a 'panacea' in education, used so frequently that it can lose its specific meaning and thus its contribution to consensus and good practice.

The difficulty in constructing a better definition of quality seems to reside in the fact that 'educational quality' always implies judgements over the content of education (what is taught), assembled from specific theory and defined paradigms. If these are not presented explicitly, it is hard to reach basic agreements for putting quality into practice.

Nowadays, educational quality is not only the concern of professional teachers but also of other decision-making agents, especially those in the

political and economic sectors and, in some cases, the 'users', i.e., the community, the family and even the students. It is claimed that one aspect explaining the difficulty in defining quality is the redistribution of power that results from it: "as regards the process and especially one of construction and transformation, its *leitmotif* is power and change" (Casassus 1999).

The question of quality was raised first by the Carnegie Commission (1968) and a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) symposium (Beeby 1969). The central theme of the symposium was an analysis of the quality problems derived from the democratisation of primary education that was taking place worldwide. This indicated inadequacies, problems with cost and evaluation and a scarcity of results. The study of quality then began to be extended to other sectors, but was still kept within the boundaries of positivist rationalism.

More recently, there has been some theoretical development of the subject but this has not gone beyond a few specialist circles. In fact, what has

been observed is a more extended treatment of quality from a rather modernist and universalist position, in contrast to a postmodernist handling of the subject embracing diversity of contexts and situations, multiplicity of options and, especially, the opinions of the agents involved.

Along these lines, Moss and Pence (1994) claim that “quality is a relative concept and not an objective reality”, adding that “definitions of quality reflect the values and beliefs, needs and agendas, influences and authorities of various decision groups who have an interest in those services”. Similarly, Carr (1993) argues:

“Those who are not professional educators, such as politicians, economists and business people, will tend to interpret and evaluate teaching quality in terms of values that are unconnected with the educational process. From these perspectives, education is seen as something serving extrinsic purposes, such as national interest, society’s economic needs or labour market demands. In such cases, judgements on quality in teaching will be made, not by applying the criteria that qualify teaching as an educational process, but based on criteria that focus on the effectiveness of teaching in order to serve a purpose that is not purely educational”.

To make progress on this aspect, theoreticians in education argue that the reductionist vision of quality needs to be broadened. The thoughts of Aguerrondo (1993) are revealing, stating the limited vision held by some about ‘quality in education’ is due to their restrictive definition of the subject and that, in contrast, the subject has the potential to address a ‘complex and all-embracing’ and ‘socially and historically determined’ concept.

We should therefore move from the modernist-instrumentalist focus, which is not the only one in existence, but is the most used in official policies and metrics, to a more postmodernist viewpoint that accepts the historical and contextualised view of educational processes, the diversity of the ‘qualities’ to which we aspire, the importance of the agents implicated and so the human dose of relativity and uncertainty common to all social processes.

But we should not treat the subject in a way that polarises the two opposing viewpoints. In some circumstances, it may be valid to employ a quality control focus in line with the investment made and the need to purchase services. But it is also possible to consider criteria that go far beyond those that are purely economic or productive. In this way, a more integrated, contextualised and participative vision of quality in education can be maintained, as shown by experience in Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua.

Woodhead (1996) is one author who puts forward a more integrated approach, saying: “quality is relative but not arbitrary”. Focusing on children’s education, he states: “like the rainbow, we are capable of identifying invariant ingredients in the spectrum of quality for early infancy, but the spectrum is not fixed because it emerges from a combination of special circumstances, viewed from individual perspectives”. Every educational programme is “a complex human system involving many affected individuals and groups” so “there are potentially many quality criteria that are closely linked to beliefs about objectives and functions”.

Casassus (1999) expresses the same ideas. By recognising that the concept of quality has a historical and socially constructed nature, they make progress in attempting to indicate the dimensions that may help measure and evaluate it.

In summary, given the complexity and plurality of the educational process and the contexts in which it takes place, it is possible to assume a conceptualisation of quality. This goes beyond a set of standards fixed by some technical authorities, usually in the economic sphere, and towards more flexible criteria that are chosen historically and in which the various agents participating in education have a voice. In this way, the concept may be understood and valued by all, and the parameters will be formed not only for the purpose of controlling but also for understanding and moving forward.

Therefore, educational quality from a more postmodern perspective would include a set of distinctive and relevant educational criteria that must be validated as satisfactory and meaningful

for the agents involved in educational activities. Achieving educational quality by meeting specific shared criteria would enable progress in both general and specific terms.

Educational quality: a right for all children

Rather than responding to a demand from the agents involved, quality of education has usually been considered as a requirement by external agents who are particularly interested in the results. Although a more active role has been given gradually to adults involved in educational processes (teachers and family), there has been little progress in considering quality of education as a children's right in their process of training for citizenship. Given that children are the 'subjects' of education, it is also necessary to address the 'perspective of rights' in the analysis. This means in general terms "recognising the principles regulating forms of social activity, such as the criteria of fairness that recognise and offer development possibilities for all" (Alvarado and Carreño 2007). It is evident that such a perspective is applicable in this field.

Arango (2001) stated that when "attention on children is based on a foundation of rights and the doctrine of integrated protection, and is implemented starting from the family, its relationship with the community and with state institutions, society is not only fighting against social exclusion. At the same time, it is contributing to the creation of social, political, cultural and economic conditions that enable countries to construct citizens, strengthen participative democracy in the present and future, develop their social capital, strengthen local organisations and improve their competitiveness. All these factors help society to engage more successfully in the processes of change demanded by the contemporary world".



Quality in early childhood education is not determined by expensive facilities or materials but by the processes and particularly the interactions that take place

All children, without exception, have the right to quality early and primary education. The imperative for the exercise of this right is most urgent in the most vulnerable sectors: the poor, marginal urban areas, rural areas, immigrants, border areas, displaced groups, etc. The limited number of quality programmes for these sectors and the absence of monitoring and evaluation prove that this area needs more work. Social and cultural relevance is an essential factor of the quality of educational programmes and, together with agent participation, must form an intrinsic part of their definition.

Assessing quality in early education: a complex but feasible task

On reviewing the bibliography, it becomes clear that some quality criteria are relatively common while others vary according to prevailing circumstances. Several authors identify possible criteria (e.g., Darder 1991, Dahlberg 1999, OECD 2006). These papers illustrate contextual issues, such as culture and family participation, and other issues connected with educational and curricular experiences that are process or product related. For example, in Latin America, the criteria on the subjects of learning activity, integration and participation, cultural pertinence and relevance have been discussed, updating a previous debate (Peralta 1992) about some essential principles of early education (the first three). The other two principles deal with issues that are more relevant to Latin America and its particular educational problems. The latter would be applicable to curricular process criteria, not the most commonly found in this field.

In fact, the trend over the last 20 years has been to address quality in early education in terms of a supposedly objective modern view, which puts quality into “rational and universal standards defined by the experts on the basis of unquestionable knowledge and measured in ways that reduce infant educational institutions to stable and rational criteria” using “methods that placed the emphasis on and gave priority to ‘how’ rather than ‘what’” (Dahlberg 1999). This view has gradually given way to one of greater openness and complexity. For example, Sylva (1999) states: “understanding the efficacy of early education requires research based on a range of paradigms, as no single one can provide answers to all our questions about policies and practices”.

So, the central problem is how to re-conceptualise educational quality taking into account diversity, subjectivity, the various views of the agents involved and the wide range of spatial and temporal contexts, without losing sight of the factors that guarantee a good educational experience. Some authors have addressed this issue. Dahlberg (1999) suggest that the solution may lie in “looking for meanings”. This involves dealing first with the rationale or reason for existence of each early childhood education centre. This would enable judgements to be made on the

different stages of work and agreement sought with others on these judgements. To summarise, the basic idea is to ‘co-build’ the meanings and judgements on the value of a particular educational experience in order to define its quality. As the OECD *Starting Strong I* report puts it: “A participatory focus to ensure and improve quality: defining, improving and controlling quality must be a democratic process involving teaching staff, parents and children. Standards are needed to regulate all forms of services, supported by joined-up investment” (OECD 2001).

In order to carry out this kind of process, studies show that it is essential to build the search for the basic meanings of the educational project with the participation of the whole educational community and by going through a critical and reflective process. Questioning and discussion is a fundamental part of applying ideas based on sound pedagogical documentation, and it is vital to set up a dialogue between the various agents involved. It is also helpful to provide facilitators who support the core group in their search, analysis and quality criteria-building process, based on the background and physical context of each case.

The latest research indicates that protecting the process of co-building and quality analysis described above can lead to finding some shared parameters that can then be contextualised. For example, the classic criterion of ‘teacher–child ratio’, normally held to be a key indicator of quality, should be “interpreted according to each country’s view of the appropriate pedagogical measures for its children, together with financial and organisational aspects” (OECD 2001). It is well known, and contemplated by cross-cultural research into nursery education, that some Asian countries (e.g., Japan) intentionally place children in larger groups to help them adapt to societies with a high population density.

It is therefore possible to have a set of quality parameters or criteria that respect the meaning of each project, as well as its dynamics and the various agents and views involved, whilst addressing the major core issues at stake. These issues are highlighted in various studies, although curricular quality criteria are often addressed alongside others

Table 1. Common quality criteria in early childhood education

Criteria/ studies	A ¹	B ²	C ³	D ⁴	E ⁵	F ⁶	G ⁷	H ⁸	Total mentions
Involvement of parents in educational projects	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
Adequate adult-child interaction	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
Suitable programme (clear and relevant intentions)		X	X		X	X	X	X	6
Evidence that children take on an active role in their own learning through play			X						1
Suitable and well-organised physical spaces			X	X		X	X	X	5
Stable routines				X					1
Monitoring and evaluation	X		X	X		X			4
Ongoing team training					X	X			2

1. Schweinhart 1981; 2. US Department of Education 1990; 3. Pugh 1996; 4. Salazar 1996; 5. National Childhood Accreditation Council 1994; 6. Myers 2001; 7. OECD 2001; 8. Tietze 2007

related to administration and management. These too are important, since they can both facilitate and hinder the quest for quality. Table 1 illustrates common quality criteria used to measure early childhood education.

Analysis of the quality criteria highlighted by research shows that the most influential factors in childhood education in order of their impact are as follows:

- 1. The contribution of parents** to the design and implementation of programmes is important in terms of the child's emotions and for ensuring consistency of educational issues at home and at school.
- 2. The quality of interaction** between all participants, but especially in adult-child relationships, both emotional and cognitive. The quantity of children under the care of one adult has some impact on this criterion, to the extent that it produces a more assertive and personal relationship.

- 3. An explicit, clear and relevant educational programme** in which the general principles are appropriate for all participants.
- 4. Monitoring and evaluation systems** for the programme and for children's learning, the results of which are taken into account when planning educational practice.
- 5. Adequate and organised physical spaces**, with access to materials that enable children to explore, discover and transform. It is more important to have a variety of materials, produced by the creativity of the teachers and the community, than sophisticated and expensive ready-made items.
- 6. Stable routines**, which organise children's days into regular periods (food, hygiene, etc.), but without becoming monotonous.
- 7. Ongoing training and preparation for the work team**, which involves on-the-job training using adult learning methodology.
- 8. Children taking an active role in their own learning through play.**

Another way of organising quality criteria in early childhood education is suggested by Woodhead (1996) under three broad headings:

1. Entry indicators, which establish the base for regulating basic quality standards. These reflect the more permanent areas in the programmes and are the easiest to define and measure. They include:

- the building and its surroundings (amount of space per child, heating, lighting, toilets, washing facilities, etc.);
- materials and equipment (furniture, play equipment, teaching and learning materials, audiovisual equipment, etc.);
- the team (qualifications, basic experience, salaries and conditions, children–adult ratios, etc.).

2. Process indicators, reflecting what happens on a day-to-day basis. These are the most difficult to identify and standardise. Some examples are:

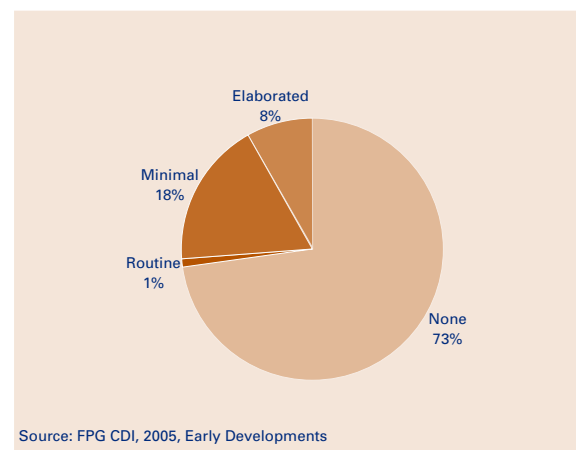
- style of care (whether adults are available for the children, ability to respond, consistency, etc.);
- children's experience (variety, the way it is organised; choices allowed; patterns of activity, meals, rest, play, etc.);
- approach to teaching and learning (control, support for children's activities, tasks set, sensitivity to individual differences, etc.);
- approach to control and discipline (setting limits, rules, managing the group, strategies for discipline, etc.);
- relations between the adults (day-to-day communication, cooperation, etc.);
- relations between parents, carers and others (greetings, opportunities for talking about the children, mutual respect, cooperation, awareness of differences, etc.).

3. Exit indicators, which deal with the impact caused by the experience. This falls into the realm of efficacy and cost-benefit and can include:

- children's health (monitoring growth, list of illnesses, etc.);
- children's skills (motor coordination, language, cognitive aspects, social relations, introduction to maths, reading and writing);
- children's adjustment to school life (transition problems, progress through grades, school achievements, etc.);
- family attitudes (supporting children's learning, parental competencies, etc.).

Once again, what is interesting about all these suggestions is that they reiterate the importance of the curriculum or programme delivered, especially the impact caused by the quality of the adult–child interaction. On this topic, an interesting argument was put forward during a recent presentation in the USA (OAS 2007). It was alleged that the poor results obtained in proportion to the investment made were due to the predominance of 'typical' interactions between teachers and children in various educational institutions across the country (see Figure 1). The amount of time during which there is no interaction (73%) indicates that the mere fact that children are in a school, even though it may have excellent facilities, does not guarantee anything. What is important is what they do there and how the staff work with them.

Figure 1. Typical teacher–child interaction



Similarly, a major European study (Tietze et al. 1997) found four types of educational styles related to certain countries and cultures and which are in turn related to results obtained from applying a quality control tool (Table 2). The authors allege that when the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) was applied, “the best scores on the scale came from the type of activities undertaken, aimed more at free play and developing self-reliance, choosing activities, working in small groups, etc., which is also linked to having fewer children per teacher”. In this context, the results from Austria and Germany are better than those from Spain and Portugal.

Table 2. Educational styles in four European countries

Country/ educational style	Directive	Directive- collective	Free and planned	Free
Spain	81%	15%	0	1%
Portugal	0	50%	33%	16%
Austria	0	25 %	48 %	23%
Germany	0	8%	6%	86%

Source: Tietze et al. (1997), quoted by Lera (2007)

However, the analysis is not quite this simple, since certain organisational features of Spanish nurseries have a more significant effect on the quality of the education than culture. Here, the average is 25 children per adult and this, according to Lera (2007), means that in “directive environments, methodologies are designed by text books”. In contrast, less traditional working methods are more stimulating, have a greater effect on language development and tend to attract greater resources. Development of freer practices relies on provision of ‘adequate teacher training’ (Lera 2007) and this includes “knowledge of educational psychology and child development” (Arnett 1987).

To conclude, the quality of the adult-child interaction is important and is based on the way it is developed. By using more open-plan working styles, greater levels of participation, self-reliance, language development, etc. can be attained.

Is quality early childhood education possible in developing countries?

Research suggests that quality in early childhood education is not determined by expensive facilities or materials but by the processes and particularly the interactions that take place. The directive style is not the most useful one, and it can be claimed that quality can be achieved through good teacher training and by a low ratio of children per adult.

The main issues of relevance in developing countries are those such as the relevance of family participation, programme ownership and guidance, and the use of local human, natural and cultural resources.

The view that quality in early childhood education can be assured by bringing in a wide range of material resources has been abandoned in both research and practice related to experiences measured all over the world. Therefore, by focusing on issues other than material resources, State provision (usually with less funds) can deliver better quality programmes than the private sector, as seen in research from Chile (Villalón et al. 2002; see Figure 2).

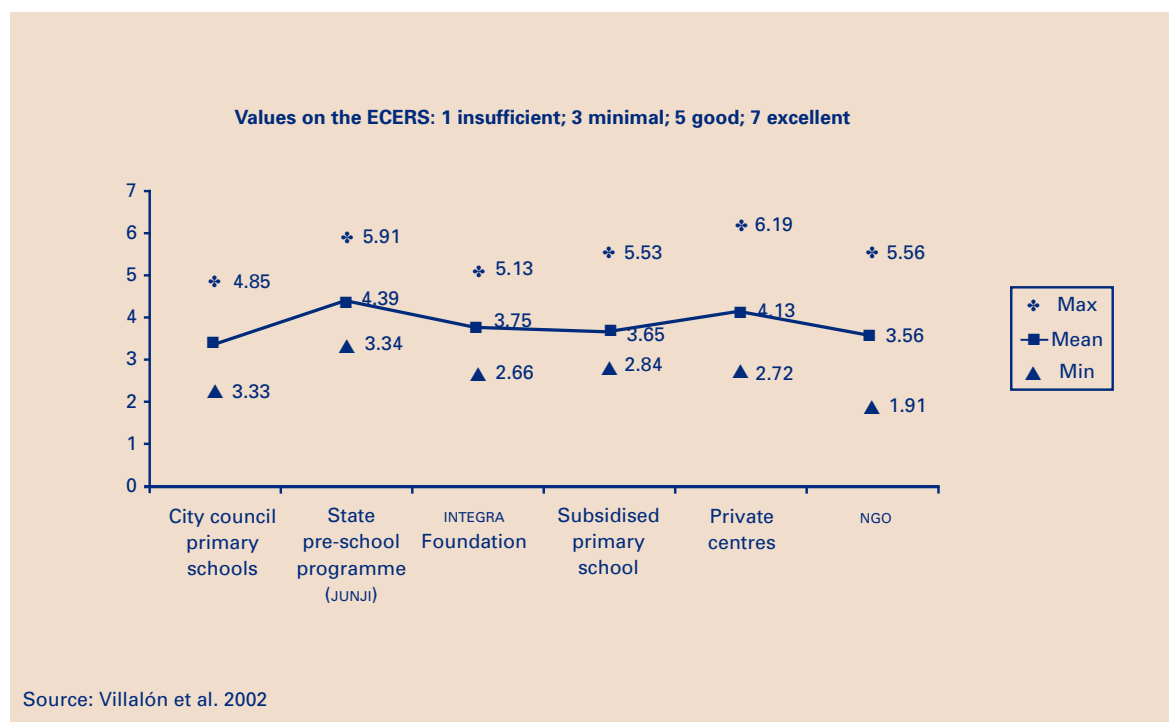
In the study, the schools belonging to the three organisations receiving only public funding showed better results than those in the private sector. In addition, the public-funded Junta Nacional de Jardines Infantiles (JUNJI) pre-school centres had a more appropriate educational focus, with professional educators, a clear programme and relevant family participation.

Although most results lie somewhere between minimum and good, one of the limiting aspects is clearly the children–adult ratio, which ranges from 30 to 45 in schools and 25 to 32 in nurseries. It can therefore be deduced that if all these quality factors are put together to work in synergy, better results could be achieved.

In Mexico, Myers et al. (2007) undertook a quality evaluation process concluding that, in centres where there were problems, the following issues needed to be addressed:

- identifying and including children’s interests;
- creating opportunities for children to propose ideas and events for themselves;

Figure 2. Evaluation of the quality of the educational environment in Transition 1 Level classrooms in Chilean pre-school education



- providing activities that foster active study, e.g., exploring, handling and reflecting;
- paying attention to cultural diversity;
- resolving conflicts in the school's relations with parents and the supervising and care community.

One or more of these criteria have been applied and observed in Latin America, Africa and some parts of Asia; however, a lack of systemisation and research in these areas means that this type of practice is not sufficiently known, valued and disseminated. There is also a great deal of directive, authoritarian and excessively strict practice driven by a lack of adequate staff training, with large numbers of children per adult and a complete lack of resources to change the situation.

Taking the contribution made by the research mentioned here as a reference, it is clear that if the quality of early childhood education in developing countries is to be improved, there must be consistent and synergistic provision of the relevant aspects. Such provision must be made in context and with

the participation of all those involved (community, families, educators and the children).

In conclusion

Early childhood education must take significant steps to develop its educational level. The fact that the initial phase of putting into place a basic coverage has not yet been completed, particularly in the case of the most needy pupils, means that quality has been relegated to second place. However, it should be fully integrated in every proposal for widening coverage.

While quality is a requirement that is subjected to constant evaluation, it often lacks sufficient technical and financial support for correct implementation. There is another major task for international organisations to take on board. Debate on the 'what' and the 'how' of early childhood education must be part of all major forums, agendas and projects, leading to policy documents and actual resources for the sector. To do this, not only the experts but also the people on the ground must have a voice. The views and opinions of communities, parents and children must be taken into account.

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Looking after society's treasures

The challenges of early childhood education

Based on an interview with Rosa María Torres, Fronesis Institute¹

“If people were aware of what is at stake in the first few years of life, small children would be considered society's treasures.” Rosa María Torres

ECM: The benefits of investing in early childhood education are widely recognised. So why is this so often neglected, particularly in terms of the most vulnerable sectors of the population?

Rosa María Torres: Generally speaking, little attention is paid to the most vulnerable sectors, not only in terms of education but also in everything else. That is why they are, and will always be, ‘vulnerable’. What produces and perpetuates this ‘vulnerability’ is the economic, social and political model. I’m putting the word in inverted commas as it is a term that glosses over many concepts, including injustice, inequality, unfairness, discrimination and violation of basic rights. It also lumps together the large numbers and diverse sectors that suffer such circumstances: the poor, children, women, indigenous groups, those with special needs, sexual minorities and all those who are subjected to ill-treatment and subordination.

With regard to small children, the facts show that recognising the importance of their early years and their education (whether delivered by parents or carers) for all-round childhood development is still more of an ideal than a reality. If people were aware of what is at stake during the first few years of life, small children would be society’s treasures in all senses and, together with their mothers and families, they would receive preferential treatment. But this is not happening. Child mortality, morbidity, malnourishment, neglect, abuse, lack of affection and protection continue to occur at an alarming rate all over the world. The absence of opportunities for

learning and development pales into insignificance when millions of children are not even expected to survive their early years.

To be a child and poor is a bad combination in our societies, since it leads to two main sources of discrimination: socio-economic status and age. Whilst poverty is officially recognised as a discriminatory factor, age usually goes unnoticed. Nevertheless, it is evident that both the early and late years of life are given extremely low priority in terms of public policy making and human rights. In education, top priority is still given to the so-called ‘school age’ as defined over the past few centuries. In fact, educational provision extending below that age is still strongly associated with the ‘pre-school’ brand of teaching.

The world initiative Education For All (EFA) launched in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 and reaffirmed in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, is a clear example of this bias. Out of the six goals set, least attention was paid to the two goals referring to small children and adults. What is more, these two goals were not included in the EFA Development Index (EDI), which has been running since 2003 with the aim of monitoring the initiative’s progress. The reason given for this omission is that ‘the data is not sufficiently standardised’ (EFA 2007). Early childhood and adulthood are also absent from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN 2000), within which the education goal focuses on achieving universal primary education, basically the survival rate to Grade 5.

The problem here is that, even with today's widespread rhetoric on the knowledge society and lifelong learning, the terms education and learning are still linked strongly to school education. Learning that takes place outside school in daily life – in the family, community, during play, at work, in contact with others, from independent reading, from the media, etc. – is not regarded as learning nor is it taken into account in educational policy development. Despite this, the right to education, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948), includes education both in and outside school.²

A number of problems, grey areas and unresolved debates persist in the two marginalised and interlinked fields of education and learning for small children and adults. Even the terminology is inconsistent. This becomes plain when you analyse how the EFA goals are formulated.

Goal No. 1, as set in Jomtien in 1990, aims for "Expansion of early childhood care and development activities, including interventions by families and the community, especially for poor, disadvantaged and disabled boys and girls." However, the 2000 (Dakar) version states: "Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children." There are clear differences between the concepts (care and development versus care and education), the intentions (to expand versus to improve provision) and the scope of action (in 1990 the emphasis was based on the family and the community, but this was omitted in 2000). Neither version quantified the goal, making it difficult to measure and enforce. The 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report, which focused on the EFA's first goal, took 2000 as its starting-point rather than 1990 (when EFA was initiated globally), concluding that 'halfway through 2015' the goals referring to early childhood and adult literacy are those receiving the least attention and are the most likely to fall behind (UNESCO 2006).

Is the 2000 revised goal really the same one that was set in 1990? We think not, because there is a huge difference between placing the emphasis on the development compared to the education of small children. The topic has prompted much debate,

not only on the terminology but also on the core issues at stake. Placing the emphasis on education, especially bearing in mind that education tends to be linked with schooling, risks fostering views and strategies that see early childhood education as a kind of early school, destined to compensate for shortcomings and even to prevent school failure in the poorest sectors, which is how the World Bank openly sees and justifies it.

As an educator, I know and always say that the goal is not education but learning (remembering that not all education produces learning and not all learning is the product of education). This is valid for any age and what is really important is the child's all-round development, which involves integrating education within all aspects of development.

Latin America has a broad school provision, but assessment of learning is not producing the expected results. How can this be explained?

Let us talk first about what we mean by school provision, learning assessment and expected results.

Provision, registration, retention, achievement and learning are different things and it is vital to differentiate between them and help people to understand the differences. School provision does not guarantee access and is certainly no guarantee of learning. It is one thing to have school places available but another to ensure families can access them, not only in terms of physical distance but also in terms of expense. Let us not forget that state education is no longer free in the majority of Latin America (Tomasevski 2006). It is also true, however, that efforts are being made to eliminate the so-called 'self-management' and 'voluntary' fees that poor families are forced to pay, thereby returning to a situation in which the right to education is safeguarded by making it free.

On the other hand, you can go to school, complete a whole education cycle and learn very little. In fact, there are people who leave school and even college without having learned to read and write properly and, even worse, without having developed any need or desire to do so. Some children learn only through the fear of being ill-treated and fail to make a connection between classroom learning and

everyday life. All these issues contribute to poor quality education.

The aim of education is to learn. However, the efforts at global level and in many Latin American and Caribbean countries are still centred on provision and registration and on infrastructure and budgets, ignoring the central issue of education. Even at international level, the term universalisation (of early childhood, primary and secondary education, etc.) is becoming understood as universalising registration. At the same time, quality and learning are playing a less prominent part in global education initiatives. In fact, quality and learning are absent from the education goal of the MDGs. Learning also disappeared from the EFA goals when they were reaffirmed in Dakar. In addition, the EDI measures education quality as 'survival rate to Grade 5', which is a step backwards in terms of the research and advances made over recent decades.

Returning to the Latin American context, you can see that this region is outstanding in its high level of school provision and registration compared to other developing regions. However, it also has high rates of school truancy and repetition, as well as poor academic results, not only in state but also in private schools, although the trend is clearer in the state sector. In other words, we have made a great deal of progress in universalising access to schooling but not in the universalisation of learning. This is the really important and most difficult issue because it requires greater effort than simply building schools and creating new teaching jobs. Universalising learning (and this is applicable to all regions in the world) implies going beyond educational policy in the narrow sense to safeguard the essential conditions for learning, which include families' subsistence, work, housing, food, health and leisure.

Can you tell us more about the distinction between learning and school performance?

Learning takes place both inside and outside the school system, and what is learned at school is not limited to the prescribed curriculum. The so-called 'hidden curriculum', which comprises informal learning from relationships and practices occurring in every educational institution, can be more important and influential than what is learned in the

classroom and from textbooks. Getting a good mark in a test does not necessarily mean that someone has acquired knowledge; it can show simply that information has been memorised, or that there has been copying from other people. Not all learning can be assessed with tests; there are important learning experiences that can only show when knowledge is applied to understanding and resolving problems, either abstract or practical, real-life situations. We also know that different people have very different learning rhythms, styles and strategies.

So what are the expected results of learning assessment? Pupils getting good marks, passing tests, finishing the year? The school looking good in academic performance ratings? Countries improving their placing in international rankings? This is the predominant approach and one that accepts the prescribed curriculum as valid and unquestioned, taking its application by teaching staff and assimilation by pupils as the parameters of achievement. For educational institutions and countries alike, this implies working on the basis of tests and results, keeping their sights set on quantitative indicators and rankings.

I prefer to believe that expected results are based on pupils' and families' satisfaction, on valuing effort, on due care for the process and not just for the result itself, and on fully respecting the right to education, which implies the right to equal learning opportunities for all, the right to learn and to learn how to learn, as an interesting and pleasurable activity, without ill-treatment, with affection, using the time, languages and methods required in each case.

What role does teacher training play in improving the quality of education and what are the main challenges facing it today?

Teaching quality is an essential factor in educational quality. But teaching quality does not depend solely on professional training. Additional attributes for a successful teacher include a good quality of life, good working conditions, motivation to teach and to learn, personal qualities, and values and attitudes towards others, particularly their pupils.

Some of the main challenges in improving the quality of education are associated with rethinking



Photo: Jon Spaul

"I prefer to believe that expected results on education are based on pupils' and families' satisfaction, and on fully respecting the right to education, which implies the right to learn and to learn how to learn, as an interesting and pleasurable activity." - Rosa Mª Torres

misconceptions about teachers and teacher training. For example, the common belief that educational quality depends solely on teachers avoids the fact that the education crisis is the responsibility of all of us and that the problem can be solved only through making changes in traditional ways of thinking and capacity building.

What, in your view, are the issues we should be addressing to guarantee a successful transition between home or the street and starting school?

The first is to understand that this is indeed a transition; it is a new situation and often a drastic change for parents and teachers as well as the children. At this stage, collaboration between family and school, according to each child's needs, is vital.

Not all parents are aware of what is involved in this transition, but all teachers should be and should be

prepared to understand and help children deal with it, as well as explaining it to their parents. Concepts such as 'second home' or 'second mother' attributed to the educational institution and the teacher are confusing and can produce an impression of continuity where in fact there is a break. As Freire (1997) argues, calling teachers 'auntie', as is the case in Brazil, creates unwanted ambiguities in the relationship and in the teaching role.

School (which includes nursery, children's centre, pre-school or school) is very different to home, being unfamiliar to the child (and often to parents) and involving a major reorganisation to the life of the whole family. The daily routine becomes fixed by timetables and rules that may go against the child's nature, including being seated for several hours, wearing uniform, carrying school materials, order, cleanliness, discipline and homework. Not only may the child need to start using a different language, as

is the case for indigenous or migrant children, but also they have to cope with more formal language codes and rules.

It is essential to remember that the transition does not always involve losses. For children suffering extreme poverty, lack of basic services, child labour, lack of affection or ill-treatment, the children's centre or school can seem like a place of freedom rather than oppression, especially if they find the comfort, containment, play, discovery, learning, socialising and self-esteem they may be missing at home.

The presumed dilemma between asking children to adapt to school or asking schools to adapt to the children should not be seen as such, but as an attempt to bring the two closer together. However, if we had to choose, we would not hesitate to say that it is the school, with all its institutional and teaching resources, that should adapt itself to suit the children. The school should not count on boys and girls arriving with any previous experience of socialising or development. It should rather assume that this is not the case and stop regarding it as a deficiency.

What is the relationship between the literacy of parents (particularly mothers) and children's learning of the written language?

In terms of the relationship between parents' education and children's schooling, the EFA 2007 report stated that children whose mothers lacked education are twice as likely to stay out of school than those whose mothers had benefited from education. Many studies have noted this effect, which boils down to a correlation between poverty and schooling, since illiterate people are usually among the poorest in society. So here we have a first-level impact on child literacy, bearing in mind that formal reading and writing skills are normally learned at school.

Studies and evaluations of school performance do not show clearly how the level of education received by parents, especially mothers, affects child literacy. However, poor women all over the world strive to be literate so they can help their children with homework and feel involved and confident in their dealings with the school. Although the levels of literacy they attain are often insufficient, the fact

that they have tried and opened themselves up to new opportunities for learning and personal growth stands them in good stead with the school and with their families.

When we talk about the impact of adult literacy on child literacy, we must define what we mean. A short programme, lasting a few weeks, does not enable anyone to read and write fluently and confidently. However, the most visible and significant impact is often an improvement in dignity and self-esteem. Although difficult to measure, both attributes have a positive impact on people and those around them, especially in the family environment. It is clear from the research available that boys and girls who grow up in literate families start school with a huge advantage. In other words, it is not only a case of making a distinction between illiterate or literate parents, but of the effective distribution of resources, actions and practice in reading and writing in daily life. In Latin America, Emilia Ferreiro's studies have thrown a great deal of light on this topic and have contributed to revolutionising written language acquisition perceptions and practices in early childhood and in schools.

We also know that education is not everything. The attitudes and expectations of parents, particularly mothers, are highly influential. This was shown by an assessment of early childhood education in Uruguay carried out in the early 1990s and which in many senses was a pioneering study in the region (Rama 1991). The study found that behind many of the best students (who had managed to break out of the vicious circle of poverty and low school performance) were mothers who believed in their children, who had great hopes for them and who encouraged them to persevere.

An important aspect shown by many programmes, studies and assessments is the close relationship between child development and adult education, and between children's education and that of their parents. Both complement each other and are mutually dependent. It is economically short sighted to view childhood and adult education as political options, as the World Bank has been defending and recommending.

Notes

- 1 www.fronesis.org
- 2 The latter was then known as fundamental education, 'the kind of education that sets out to help children and adults who lack the advantages of a formal education'.

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The transition to child care

By the time this edition of *Early Childhood Matters* is published, UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre (IRC) will be about to publish its *Report Card 8: The Transition to Child Care*. The Report Card proposes ten benchmarks for measuring the quality of early childhood care and education, and applies them to the 25 high-income countries in the OECD.

Eva Jespersen is the Chief of Monitoring of Social and Economic Policies at unicef's Innocenti Research Centre (IRC) in Florence. She spoke to *Early Childhood Matters* (ECM) about the background to the Report Card and what the IRC hopes its publication will achieve.

ECM: This is the eighth report card issued by the Innocenti Research Centre. The seventh, which dealt with children's wellbeing, provoked an unprecedented level of media attention. How did you decide on early childhood services as the topic for the follow-up?

Eva Jespersen: That decision really grew out of doing the research for Report Card 7, as it became clear to us that it was practically impossible to get information on early childhood that would allow comparisons between OECD countries beyond health indicators. As a consequence Report Card 7 gave more attention to primary school aged children and upwards, but we knew it was a shortcoming not to be able to include more indicators specific to younger children.

We wanted to use the opportunity of Report Card 8 to propose an initial set of indicators or basic standards/benchmarks that would allow for easier comparisons between countries and stimulate further refinements. A guiding principle of the Report Card series is that if you're going to seek effective change in some area, first of all you need to be able to measure it in a transparent and accountable way.

We were also very aware that early childhood has become a hot issue in many OECD countries in the last few years, with an increasing number

of governments increasing their expenditures on young children. Our intention is that by making international comparisons possible, even if only in the form of a snapshot, this Report Card will both fuel and focus debates going on within particular nations and give taxpayers greater ability to judge whether they're getting value for money.

Few of our readers will be surprised by the report's essential conclusion, that there is a compelling case for investing much more in early childhood. It's a recurring complaint in the early childhood community that, though well-established, this message isn't more acted upon.

Indeed, there is a huge literature on early childhood showing what a great impact well-designed programmes can have, and how many potential benefits there are for higher levels of investment. The problem is that this discussion has largely been going on very much within the early childhood community, and tending to concentrate too much on the minutiae of nuances and refinements.

What's needed is to distill the essentials of the case in a way that takes it beyond the realm of specialists and captures the imagination of both policymakers and the general public. We need to make voters more aware of early childhood, and thereby ensure that politicians feel more compelled to address it. That is where we believe UNICEF can have an impact, as a strongly invested partner in early childhood but also with the ability to take a step back and present a broader view.

So what is it about the approach taken by the Report Card that will help investment in quality early childhood programmes to make that breakthrough into public awareness?

Largely it's the simple fact of having the audacity to seek to compare. When we started this process, there wasn't a lot of systematised information out there. When we looked at the four dimensions of quality, access, political will and the various conditioning

factors that enable investments in early childhood services to meet their potential, we found that it was frustratingly difficult to make comparisons.

With this Report Card we are suggesting that these are areas in which comparisons can usefully be made, and this is not an uncontroversial idea. There will be those who argue – and John Bennett discusses this question in a background paper that will come out with the report – that there are so many cultural particularities involved, which may challenge a comparison systems of different countries.

But we would point out that the caveats of cultural sensitivities don't stop us from valuing comparisons in other fields, such as healthcare. So we think it's worthwhile to come up with benchmarks that will allow international comparisons on quality of early childhood services.

The Report Card sets out 10 benchmarks, ranging across issues like parental leave, access, child poverty and staff training. How did you come up with these benchmarks?

John Bennett was our lead expert and researcher on this. We started off by holding two consultations at the IRC involving early childhood experts including from a number of governments we were going to rank, to discuss what might be the indicators that could be assessed. And these produced an initial list of 15 questions that were formulated in a way that would lend themselves to comparisons by requiring a concrete answer.

After a lot of debate and back-and-forth, we took the decision to winnow down these questions into the ten benchmarks you see in the report. Not everyone was happy with this. There will be some early childhood experts who will complain that we have missed important nuances.

But we realised that there is a trade off to be made here. We wanted to avoid getting so bogged down in nuances that we'd be unable to make our case clearly and comprehensibly. There will always be a balance to be struck between covering an area in perfect detail and being able to distill it in a way that's suitable for reaching an outside audience.

There are obviously some countries that will come out of this benchmarking exercise looking better than others. Were all the countries in agreement with the indicators used, and to what extent are you interested in joining the dots between the countries that show up well on these indicators and the kinds of policies that they have in common?

We're very careful not to get involved in discussing what are the best policies. We just want to say here are some indicators of what you can try to achieve, and let each nation take it from there in terms of debating what their vision should be for early childhood and how best to achieve it.

One thing that all these 25 countries have in common is that all of them are sufficiently affluent to achieve ambitious national plans for early childhood, if the political will is there. And you can see from some Central European countries in particular just how much can be achieved in this area with sufficient political will even when financial resources are more limited.

Of course, it's impossible for everyone to be above average, and the choice of benchmarks is our own. But this is not about finger-pointing and creating anxiety, it's about stimulating debate – and this comparative data also helps us to recognise that there are a lot of positive experiences in a lot of different countries. In all 25 countries, the early childhood specialists have been very supportive of this initiative and we're grateful to all of the governments for being responsive to our questions.

The amount of debate stimulated by Report Card 7 sets the bar pretty high for Report Card 8. Once the paper is published, how will you go about the task of getting it talked about?

One of UNICEF's great strengths is that in each of the OECD countries assessed in this Report Card we have a national committee, and they will take the lead in organising events with the media and getting national experts lined up to contribute to the public discussion. The headline-grabbers will differ between nations – in one country the issue that most needs highlighting might be parental leave, say, while in others it might be about access to early childhood care.



"One thing we're very keen to get picked up is the importance of meeting the needs of vulnerable children; it's not only a question of school readiness but of social inclusion and that is much better tackled through quality provision for all." - Eva Jespersen

At UNICEF IRC we will support the committees in any way we can by providing spokespeople and media resources. But we're fortunate that this is already a hot topic in many countries, and consequently it's a debate that many national committees are eager to get involved in.

And if it were up to you to write the headlines, what's the one take-home message that you'd like to see emphasised in the public debate that you hope this Report Card will spark?

One thing we're very keen to get picked up is the importance of meeting the needs of vulnerable children in an inclusive way, because the danger of targeting programmes at poor children is that the level of service often ends up being comparably poor. Especially for children who come from immigrant families and where there are issues with language, it's not only a question of school readiness but of social inclusion and that is much better tackled through quality provision for all.

The Report Card 8, in brief

The following is a condensation of the forthcoming Innocenti Report Card 8, The Childcare Transition, prepared by Early Childhood Matters. It inevitably cannot do justice to nuances contained in the full report, and should not be taken as indicating what the Innocenti Research Centre would wish to emphasise.

The great change

The Report Card starts by calling attention to the "great change" now occurring in the way in which children are being brought up in the world's economically advanced countries: "Today's rising generation in the countries of the OECD is the first in which a majority are spending a large part of their early childhoods not in their own homes with their own families but in some form of childcare."

The neuroscience revolution

While this "Childcare Transition" gathers pace, a "parallel revolution" is underway in neuroscientific research, increasing our understanding of the importance of early childhood. Important concepts to emerge from this research include:

- the sequence of 'sensitive periods' in brain development;

- the importance of ‘serve and return’ relationships with carers;
- the role of love as a foundation for intellectual as well as emotional development;
- the fostering of the child’s growing sense of agency;
- the ways in which the architecture of the developing brain can be disrupted by stress;
- the critical importance of early interactions with family members and carers in the development of stress management systems.

Neuroscience “is beginning to confirm and explain the inner workings of what social science and common experience have long maintained – that loving, stable, secure, stimulating and rewarding relationships with family and caregivers in the earliest months and years of life are critical for almost all aspects of a child’s development”.

The potential for good

The childcare transition brings an enormous potential for good. Children can benefit from interaction with other children and with childcare professionals; their cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social development can be enhanced. Childcare can help immigrant children with integration and language skills, and can erode one of the last great obstacles to equality of opportunity for women.

Most importantly, early childhood education and care offers “a rare opportunity to mitigate the effects of poverty and disadvantage on the futures of many millions of children” by extending the benefits of good quality child early education and care to all children.

The potential for harm

But the potential for harm in the childcare transition is equally evident. For babies and infants, a lack of close interaction and care with parents can result in sub-optimal cognitive and linguistic development, and long-term effects which may include depression, withdrawal, inability to concentrate and other forms of mental ill-health.

“Concern has also been expressed about whether childcare may weaken the attachment between parent and child, and whether it may not be putting at risk the child’s developing sense of security and trust in others. Doubts have also been raised

about possible long term effects on psychological and social development, and about whether the rise of childcare may be associated with a rise in behavioural problems in school-age children”. The most important generalisation to be made is that “the younger the child and the longer the hours-per-week spent in childcare the greater the risk”.

The need for monitoring

Most OECD governments have formulated policies and invested in early childhood education and care. The approaches, however, vary from country to country: “In some, early childhood services are almost as well-established and well-funded as primary schools. In others, they are often muddled in purpose, uneven in access, patchy in quality, and lacking systematic monitoring of access, quality, child-to-staff ratios, or staff training and qualification”.

OECD governments have the “clear responsibility” to monitor the childcare transition. “In fields such as health care, employment law, and the education of older children, common standards have demonstrated a potential to stimulate and support sustained progress”.

Four dimensions and 10 benchmarks

The Report Card proposes 10 benchmarks as “an initial step towards an OECD-wide monitoring of what is happening to children in the childcare transition” and applies them to 24 OECD countries plus Slovenia. There is an “inevitable crudeness” about these benchmarks as they can only use the limited data that is available, and the Report Card is careful to express caveats about their limitations. They were drawn up in consultation with academic experts and government officials from different countries, and each represents “a pairing of an indicator with a suggested value”.

The 10 benchmarks can be used to monitor progress across four dimensions which are critical in enabling the delivery of effective early childhood services: the policy framework, access quality, and a supporting context of wider social and economic factors.

Going forward

The Report Card calls for “essential data on early childhood services to be included in standardised data sets. Without definitions there can be no

measurement; without measurement there can be no data; without data there can be no monitoring; and without monitoring there can be neither evidence-based policy, effective advocacy, or public accountability”.

It does not propose outcome indicators, but expresses the hope of working towards “a widely agreed means of measuring the extent of the disparities between children’s abilities at the point of entry into the formal education system. It would then be possible, in principle, to measure the overall efficacy of early childhood services by the extent to which they succeed in reducing such disparities”.

Political feasibility

Is doubling the amount spent on early childhood services a politically feasible goal? Encouraging factors include the large and growing public demand for high quality services, and “widespread recognition that many of the social, educational and behavioural problems that affect the quality of life in the economically developed nations have their origins in poor parenting and disadvantaged backgrounds”.

With increasing knowledge about early childhood, “there is today no convincing reason for spending less on early childhood education and care than on schools and teachers for older children”.

A high-stakes gamble

In conclusion, the Report Card describes the childcare transition across the industrialised world as “a revolution in how the majority of young children are being brought up. And to the extent that this change is unplanned and unmonitored, it could also be described as a high-stakes gamble with today’s children and tomorrow’s world”.

It points out the “clear danger that the potential benefits of early childhood education will be reserved for children from better-off and better-educated families while the potential for harm will be visited mainly on children from disadvantaged homes”. The childcare transition could become “a new and potent source of inequality. If this is allowed to happen, an historic opportunity will be lost”.

An historical overview

Developing quality early childhood programmes in United Kingdom

Marion Flett, Research Consultant on Children, Families and Communities

Historical background

Provision for young children in Western societies has been made traditionally by different service sectors, which include health, childcare, education and community development. Each has a different emphasis on what constitutes quality care, based on the different value bases and conceptual frameworks that relate to early child development. Hence the tradition of mostly structured learning experiences in nursery education. Childcare provision, however, was based on a health and hygiene model, which evolved gradually into a compensatory childcare movement for children 'in need'. Community development approaches have focused on provision for young children as a part of provision for adults, particularly to allow women to participate more fully in the public arena. The different approaches are also bound up with different concepts of the family, the role of women and how concepts have changed over time, particularly during the 20th century. Hence the regulatory framework and the definitions of quality in provision have also changed as social forces have influenced policy, practice and research in this field.

The debate around what constitutes quality provision for young children, who should organise it and how, has to be viewed within the context of the establishment of a social welfare state in the UK since 1945¹. During the Victorian era, the industrialist Robert Owen was one of the first to set up formal 'childcare' to provide for the children of his female mill workers. While he was motivated principally by economics, Owen was a visionary who ensured good quality provision in terms of the children's opportunities to play and learn.

The value of nursery education in terms of promoting child development was recognised in the early part of the 20th Century by pioneers like Margaret MacMillan, Froebel and Montessori. However, childcare provision was first developed on a wider scale after the outbreak of World War 2, when women were needed in the munitions factories. It was only on the return of the soldiers and the need to ensure employment for them that mothers were encouraged to return to their 'rightful' place in the kitchen.

The creation of the UK's welfare state was based on the principle of insurance to cover men as the breadwinners, with the idea that they would contribute to the system and enjoy its benefits when they and their families were 'in need'. The phrase 'in need' is significant for it was intended that the state should act as a safety net, but not substitute for the family. The idea that the best place for young children was at home with their mothers was very much reinforced by the public policy agenda. Hence little attention was paid to providing a quality service for those who needed childcare and minimal resources were allocated.

Along with other aspects of public policy, considerable change and innovation occurred in education during the 1960s. Nursery education was included in a government review of primary education, the 1967 Plowden Report, which recommended that young children should be in nursery education for part-time sessions only (Plowden 1967). While based on the belief that full-time nursery education was too onerous for the

children, there was concern that policy makers followed this recommendation because of the high cost of providing a full-time quality service. It is an interesting example of how policy decisions can be framed in terms of quality arguments when in fact the issue is one of resources.

'Educate a woman and you educate a nation'

Despite a recommendation for the expansion of nursery provision and acknowledgement of its benefits, particularly to disadvantaged children, a policy of state nursery education was not implemented for another three decades. By this time, a voluntary playgroup movement managed by parents had demonstrated the power of the community in providing a good quality service for young children and, at the same time, supporting the development of women as educators, play leaders, managers and fundraisers. Thus the concept of quality came to take on a broader dimension in that it encompassed a two-generation approach to learning that benefited the whole family (Flett and Scott 1995). At the same time, there were increasing employment opportunities for women and a growing need for better childcare provision that was not met fully by the playgroup movement. The independent childcare sector responded to the demand by offering private childminding and nursery places within a regulatory framework defined by social services departments rather than education. Hence the emphasis was on the adequacy of facilities and standards of care rather than on the quality of the learning experience. Nonetheless, children benefited greatly from these services, the best of which demonstrated the concept of care and learning as being inextricably interlinked (Ball 1994, Melhuish 2003).

Policy into practice

By 1997, when a Labour government was elected, there were a number of competing agendas concerning the quality of provision of childcare and early education. Research showed that care and learning cannot be considered separately (particularly for young children); that the early years are vital for physical, cognitive, social and emotional development; and that development in each domain enhances development in all the others (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000, Mustard 2000, McCain and Mustard 1999, Rogoff 2003). However, policy makers and some practitioners were not

always keen to embrace holistic perspectives on child development and integrated responses in terms of provision. In a strange policy twist, the new government promised a part-time nursery education place for every 3 and 4-year-old, not on educational grounds but as a response to the growing demand for childcare and the social justice agenda to address child poverty. The irony was that part-time provision (12.5 hours per week) did little to enable mothers to gain access to the labour market. In addition, the system created many anomalies, not least in terms of the regulatory framework that was meant to ensure quality of provision.

It was claimed that by creating a sound basis for achievement in the early years, children from disadvantaged backgrounds would perform better, not only in primary school but also in secondary school and beyond. Much of the rhetoric was based on rather superficial analysis of the results of the Perry Pre-School Project undertaken by the High/Scope Foundation (Schweinhart 1993). This research has been quoted as demonstrating the case for investment in quality early childhood education. But as the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) report (Penn et al. 2006) pointed out, care should be taken in extrapolating the results too generally. The Perry project involved a limited number of black American students in a specific urban community and was deemed a success based on indicators such as a reduction in unemployment and crime when the children reached adulthood. The applicability to different settings is questionable.

Early education and poverty reduction

A recent report on UK Children's Centres (Capacity 2007) pointed out that such centres play only a limited part in reducing poverty if they do not take account of women's employment opportunities. Similarly, the former Director of the Sure Start programmes, now a senior policy adviser to the Cabinet, made reference in a recent seminar (Tavistock Institute, January 2008) to the need to take account of parents' difficult circumstances if children are to benefit from quality services that influence a successful outcome. She also referred to the need to move beyond setting up frameworks and structures that promote an integrated approach to

service provision, and to focus more on integration of actions by different professionals and agencies.

Issues relating to quality

The rapid increase since 1997 in the quantity of provision in countries like the UK, both in childcare and early education, was accompanied by a need to ensure that quality was maintained. Policy makers looked to the research community to inform them of recent evidence on promoting optimal child development (e.g., Mooney et al. 2003; Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart 2004). At the same time, the policy framework was shifting to accommodate better integration of services for children and this was particularly apparent in early childhood services. However, integration led to numerous challenges since the providers and practitioners had different traditions (Moss and Pence 1994, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999). Responses included efforts to devise guidelines for good practice and a regulatory framework within which quality indicators of care and education were used to assess the efficacy of different settings in achieving their objectives.

Throughout Europe, the age for starting primary school varies considerably. Scandinavian and Mediterranean countries generally introduce formal primary education at a later age than the UK. In England, children start reception classes as young as 4 years of age, while in Scotland the minimum is 4.5 years and some children may be 5.5 years when they enter primary school. Although these are not large differences, there are concerns relating to staff-to-child ratios and the expectations of staff and children. These relate firstly to the pressure to push inappropriate primary school curricula downwards, secondly to the increasing scholarisation of young children (Baron, Field and Schuller 2000), and thirdly to the lack of recognition of the importance of learning through play. Both theoreticians and practitioners stress the importance of experiential learning, particularly through the medium of play, and the need to make this a key element in the quality frameworks on which provision is assessed. (Elliot 2006, Fler 2005).

Quality improvement

In England, which has a separate education and childcare system from the rest of the UK, a large-scale quality improvement programme has been put

in place to link a regulatory quality framework for children aged under 3 years with the assessment and inspection system already in place for children in schools. The National Children's Bureau (NCB) was appointed as the lead body in developing a National Quality Improvement Network (NQIN) for the early years childcare and play sectors, bringing together the public, private and voluntary sectors. In her foreword to the report on Quality Improvement Principles, the Minister for Children, Young People and Families stated: "Research shows that high quality early education, together with a positive learning environment at home, has a strong effect on children's attainment at the end of primary school" (NCB 2007).

Following wide consultation with the various sectors, the research team identified 10 quality improvement principles. It was careful to distinguish between **quality improvement**: a process of raising the quality of experience enjoyed by children in the various early learning settings, and **quality assessment**: a specific type of quality improvement that recognises a setting has made progress against a set of agreed standards and achieved an accredited level or stage. This requires independent review by trained professionals, in this case the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Clearly such a broad and overarching structure can be put in place only in contexts where there is sufficient existing provision and the availability of staff to carry it out. It also rather begs the question of the place of robust self-evaluation which also allows practitioners to engage in the 'plan, do, reflect' process as a means of improving quality.

Other research has demonstrated that quality assurance processes leading to accreditation are linked to higher quality provision (Munton, McCullum and Rivers 2001). The authors identified the two key characteristics of quality assurance schemes as the content of written materials and the procedures involved in working towards accredited status. However, these findings say little about the impact on quality improvement. The idea behind NQIN was to encourage people to put into practice the principles that would improve outcomes, as identified in *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2004). The government's statutory guidance: *Raising Standards – Improving Outcomes* (DfES 2006) was intended to



Photo: LYDIA MARTINI/Lineair

The rapid increase since 1997 in the quantity of provision in countries like the UK, both in childcare and early education, was accompanied by a need to ensure that quality was maintained

link with other quality improvement initiatives and support delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage (the first stage of the national curriculum in England), making reference to both the Children Act (2004) and the Childcare Act (2006).

Public accountability

Increasing emphasis on accountability has led to the inclusion of additional factors in guidelines for assessing quality. For example, the quality of centre leadership, the relationship with parents and their involvement in supporting their children's learning, and the development of social and emotional as well as physical and cognitive skills. Governments have also invested heavily in defining guidelines for younger children who attend childcare and in supporting their parents as educators (Abbott and Langston 2005). The investment in the Sure Start programmes in the UK was intended to provide enhanced opportunities for children in poorer areas. Despite reaching large numbers of children, evaluation indicates limited success with a lack of impact on the most excluded groups. Other research suggests that there has been little improvement in the

children's achievements, but further studies are needed (Sylva et al. 2003). It is difficult to argue that new initiatives are necessarily best judged by traditional means. The Pen Green Centre research team, for example, would argue that the most disadvantaged communities do not require more of the same but need radical new approaches to making provision more inclusive and accessible (Whalley 2007).

Outcomes for children

In order to achieve quality of input and better outcomes for children the following factors should be considered:

- a holistic perspective on child development recognising the interrelationship of genetic factors with opportunities for active learning;
- the development of provision that integrates health, care and education in action, not only in structures;
- intergenerational approaches that recognise the needs and rights of parents and children to the learning opportunities that will enrich their lives in the long term;
- the implications for training of staff in a context

of multi-disciplinary teams or the development of the 'new professional';

- the implications for mechanisms of provision that are about 'learning communities' rather than sectoral approaches like 'early childhood care and education'.

(See OECD 2006, UNESCO 2004, CCCH 2006)

Children's rights

The Child Rights perspective enshrined in the UN Convention (UNCRC 1989) has introduced an advocacy approach in terms of social justice and social inclusion. In particular the publication of General Comment 7 on the rights of young children (Bernard van Leer Foundation 2006) has reinforced the perspective of the human rights approach to education (UNICEF/UNESCO 2007) and shifted the debate towards children's entitlement to provision rather than taking a needs-based approach.

This shift in perspective has implications for the accountability of providers. Not only does early childhood provision now enjoy an enhanced status, but there is also a greater obligation to demonstrate how it lays the foundations for young children to benefit fully from primary education (Feinstein and Duckworth 2006; Goodman and Sinesi 2007; Sammons et al. 2004).

Conclusion

To achieve the best for young children in terms of the UN Education For All (EFA) Goals, it is necessary to adopt a different mind-set on the way that quality provision is made. There are lessons to be learned from the segregated systems that prevail in Western countries. Particularly in an age of global technology, quality provision for resource-poor communities will not benefit from a competition for resources among different groups. Knowledge and skills need to be developed at all ages. We know that learning begins at birth and that investing in young children pays off, not only for individuals but also for communities and wider societies. Hence support for provision that recognises the importance of the child now (in terms of their rights) and invests in their future makes good sense for knowledge-based economies. Raising the status of women is also valuable, since they can become educators and role models for their children and make a wider contribution to society. While systemic problems

will not be solved simply by improving the quality of early education provision, it is possible to build on existing strengths and realise the aim of involving the wider community in learning opportunities (Freire 1996). The result could be a new dynamic in the educational relationship that benefits both children and adults and contributes to the achievement of the EFA Goals, not only in relation to early education but also across a much wider canvas.

Note

- 1 This article refers to the UK and some of its former colonial territories, drawing out general points relating to the definitions of quality and standards and the implications for different types of provision.

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Promoting equal access to education

Supporting Roma children through a parent–school partnership project

Center for Educational Initiatives (CEI) Step-by-Step Project, Bosnia and Herzegovina

It is 8 pm and a group of 20 parents and their children – a mixture of Roma and non-Roma – are standing in line in front of a small office in the *Branko opić* Elementary School in Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina. They are waiting patiently to return their picture books and get more to read. They have just finished a two-hour workshop, and they are talking to each other and the parent-group facilitators about how they have spent time with their children during the past week and which activities have been successful. In this country, more than 90 percent of children aged 3 to 6 years are not attending pre-school and there are only a handful of Roma children in pre-school. However, this elementary school has initiated a creative response to the need to provide early childhood development opportunities for the young children and families who are normally left out of the system. So, what brought these parents, teachers and children together?

Setting the context: educational opportunities for Roma children in Bosnia

Few Bosnian Roma children complete their basic education. Only 32 percent of Roma children complete primary school, and the drop-out rate increases in higher grades, especially for girls. Less than 10 percent attend secondary education and only a few students are enrolled in university¹. This educational deprivation amongst Roma children is the consequence of three intertwined causes: general racism and segregation in society, low socio-economic status and a minority-insensitive educational system. Pervasive racism at all levels of the school system results in education settings that

are inherently unequal because they do nothing to support the success of Roma children in school. Roma children are more likely to have a lower socio-economic background than their majority peers. Even when preschool facilities are available, most families are not able to pay the fees, even though they are subsidized. The high level of illiteracy amongst parents and the lack of educational materials at home result in educational disadvantages when the children enter school. As a result, unlike their majority peers, most Roma children enter formal education unprepared: they are not fluent in the language of instruction (at home they speak Romani rather than Bosnian), and they lack basic social skills and competencies. Many have never held or played with pencils, crayons, paints or books.

At the same time, biases that exist against the Roma are reflected in the educational system. Some schools still have segregated classrooms for Roma children, while teachers have low expectations of both the children and their parents. Roma parents do not feel welcomed in schools, and this leads to mutual distrust. Educators sometimes view Roma parents as uninterested and therefore make little effort to engage them in their children's education and the school community.

Breaking the cycle by reaching out to Roma parents

In an effort to address this problem, the Center for Educational Initiatives (CEI) Step-by-Step², a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that promotes access to quality, child-centred education for all children in Bosnia and Herzegovina, introduced a

parenting education programme in one school in each of three selected communities. The goals of the initiative were to improve children's readiness for school, promote better school-family relationships and encourage more positive expectations amongst parents and teachers. More specifically, the objectives were:

- to raise awareness of and sensitivity to minority and human rights issues amongst educators and school administrators in three communities with high Roma populations;
- to support parents in creating a stimulating home environment for developing the cognitive and social skills of Roma children aged 3 to 6 years;
- to improve the school-readiness of Roma children through positive interventions in the areas of early learning and literacy.

In the first year, approximately 15 primary school teachers, 60 Roma parents and 40 majority parents were involved in the programme in the three communities.

Two parenting education programmes

The intervention was based on two parenting education programmes: 'Parenting with Confidence and Getting Ready for School'³. The educational materials were developed and piloted in four countries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in collaboration with the International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA), a regional network established to promote access, equity and quality in early childhood education. Materials and training were provided for early childhood experts in 29 countries participating in the Step-by-Step Programme, an early childhood education initiative implemented since 1994 primarily in CEE and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Bosnian trainers and experts participating in the programme adapted the training workshops and materials to fit their specific context. The materials have also been implemented in related projects in poor communities in Argentina and the United States.

'Parenting with Confidence' is designed to support parents in providing an optimal home environment for their young children. The aim is to help parents to become more aware of what they are already doing well and to provide a learning environment

within which they can examine alternative ideas and learn skills for more positive parent-child interactions in everyday life. More specifically the programme attempts to:

- support parents in their child-rearing efforts;
- offer child development information and alternative parenting techniques;
- foster effective communication between parents and their children;
- enhance parents' skills in providing rich child-learning experiences;
- promote parent-school partnerships.

By educating parents about basic child development concepts, the programme develops parents' confidence and provides them with some comfort in knowing how much they are doing already to give their child the best possible start. Parents learn observation skills that help them become more aware of their children's verbal and non-verbal messages. Facilitators can select from a variety of themes to discuss with parents, including:

- What is child development?
- Understanding brain development
- Play: an adventure in learning
- Early literacy
- Role of fathers
- Understanding temperament
- Setting limits
- Keeping safe
- The transition from home to school

Additional activities were drawn from a second series of materials: 'Getting Ready for School', a home-based curriculum that helps parents equip their children with the skills and enthusiasm for learning they need when they start school. It focuses on developing and reinforcing early literacy and numeracy. There is a guide for facilitators and separate materials for parents and children. Through weekly workshops, leaders disseminate and explore the materials with parents and support them as they help their children get ready for school. The materials are designed to be open-ended and to help parents tailor activities to their children's interests and abilities. For example, parents can teach number concepts using games such as dominos or by counting when cooking, and the children can begin to read by focusing on the first letters of words used around the house.

Guidebooks provide parents with advice on how to make the activities easier or more challenging, depending on the child's level of development.

Developing skills and learning together: workshops for parents

"We've been exchanging experiences with other parents. That is important because all those 'problem' situations are not problems any more. We all have similar concerns."

Participating parent

One of the most challenging tasks for many schools was inviting Roma parents to join together to establish a new programme to support younger children in the community. Each of the three participating schools provided a room for the workshops to take place, and trained two school staff (usually primary school teachers) in early childhood development, parenting and group facilitation techniques. School principals arranged teaching schedules to include the two-hour weekly sessions within the teaching load of the participating teachers. This was a critical step, as it meant that no additional funding was required to support workshop facilitators, and this will support the sustainability of the project.

In each of the participating schools, parent education workshops were held once a week for 10 months. Although most participants were Roma, parents from the majority population whose children did not attend preschool were also invited. This created the opportunity for parents to learn from each other in an accepting and welcoming environment. An initial series of workshops on 'Education for Social Justice', an anti-bias program for adults, were provided to all parents and teachers participating in the programme⁴. These personal development workshops helped all participants to learn to bridge their cultural differences and respect each other.



Photo: Courtesy Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step BiH

Through weekly workshops, leaders disseminate and explore the materials with parents and support them as they help their children get ready for school

"I've changed my attitude toward teacher-parent relationships. I expect much better co-operation with these parents than I've had with the parents of children in my previous classes."

Workshop facilitator (also a teacher)

The co-ordinators predicted that many parents would find it difficult to arrange childcare so they could attend parent workshops. To prevent this becoming a barrier to participation, the children were also invited to participate in every workshop. Workshop leaders prepared activities for the children, focusing on the development of social, cognitive, emotional and motor skills. During each two-hour session, the children spent some time with their parents and some time in a child-centred classroom environment. Likewise, the parents spent some time doing activities with the children and some time in parent workshops. Involving both parents and children had an unexpected consequence: when parents were tempted to skip a workshop, the children insisted they attend.

"After the workshops, the children couldn't stop talking about the activities. They told everyone at home and

even spoke to grandmother and grandfather on the phone.”

Parent

Ongoing communication: parent resource room and lending library

To facilitate and model a stimulating learning environment, the project provided funds for furnishing and equipping a room with learning materials to support cognitive development and language skill acquisition. Educational materials, including reading and picture books, were made available for parents and children to borrow. Each parent also received a set of 10 booklets containing information on basic child development and these supported the workshop activities. Focusing on children from birth through to age 6 years, the booklets contain practical answers to the cognitive, emotional, social and language questions facing parents of young children.

Making a difference

The children who attended preparatory workshops with their parents throughout the 2006–07 school year are now starting first grade. A formal evaluation is in progress. While the outcomes of parenting education programmes are difficult to measure, there is no doubt that this programme has already had positive outcomes. The programme raised awareness of and sensitivity to minority and human rights among educators and school administrators in the three communities and has helped set a group of children on the path to educational success.

“On Monday, 3 September 2007, Elementary School II in Mostar began a new school year,” says Fahira Vejzovi, one of five teachers involved in the project. “For many of the 120 children who entered the first grade classrooms, it was the first time they had been inside the school building. School staff welcomed the children and parents with kindness and support, but still some of the children couldn’t hold back their tears after their parents had left. However, the teachers noticed that none of the 25 children who had attended workshops during the previous year cried or asked for their parents. They were already familiar with the school building, the classroom and the school staff. It was especially touching to see that they were trying to comfort the children who were crying. They were ready to play with others, learn a

song, read their name and the names of others, count the words in a song, and they stayed focused longer than the others. That must be the result of the workshops.”

In order to support the sustainability of project outcomes, CEI Step-by-Step organised a final two-day meeting with all participating schools plus two additional schools from each of the three communities. After presenting the first year results, all nine schools agreed to implement parenting workshops on a regular basis in the future. They plan to establish a formal network of schools and trained facilitators and to help strengthen additional schools by sharing their experience and coaching new facilitators. Five schools from other parts of the country have also expressed a strong interest in starting parenting workshops and have these have been given the necessary materials. Thus, in the second year of the programme, 14 schools are holding parenting workshops using their own resources and several more are making plans to follow suit.

In addition, three Pedagogical Institutes in these communities will integrate parenting workshops in their annual plans for extracurricular activities. This is very important because it provides the legal framework for schools to organise and fund parent workshops. The Pedagogic Institute from one region (Herzegovina-Neretva Canton) even decided to support project outcomes further by hiring experienced facilitators to conduct training for all schools in the district.

Note

- 1 Official census data show a population of 8,864 Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina; however, unofficial estimates by NGOs show a population of between 40,000 and 50,000.
- 2 For more information about the Bosnian project, please contact Radmila Rangelov-Jusovic, Director, CEI (radmila@coi-stepbystep.ba);
- 3 For more information about the Parenting with Confidence or Getting Ready for School materials, please contact Sarah Klaus at the OSI (sarah.klaus@osf-eu.org).
- 4 For more information about the CEE/CIS regional Early Childhood Development network and the Education for Social Justice Program please contact Aija Tuna at the ISSA (atuna@issa.hu).

Building bridges

Quality in successful transition between families and schools in the central rainforest of Peru

Regina Moromizato, Professor, Faculty of Education, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

Transitions, understood as the step from one situation to another, are bound to involve change in terms of contexts, circumstances or status. Throughout the process, children experience the dualism of loss and gain, when they stop being one thing and become something different. In education, some transitions trigger experiences that are difficult to deal with (such as leaving home for a different environment), since they involve new challenges and demands.

The ‘Niños de la Amazonía’ (Amazon Children) project, run by the Faculty of Education at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú and supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, has been working in native communities in Peru’s central rainforest. The project aims to improve the learning achievements of young children in native Amazonian communities by supporting satisfactory transition processes.

The project set out with an optimistic view of the changes that children undergo, which involves understanding that change generates conflict, but can also offer opportunities for enrichment (Sacristán 1997, OECD 2006), stimulation, and cultural capital that enables growth. Such changes will be absorbed in a positive way when conditions are favourable and transitions are allowed to happen properly. The project focused on two contexts that affect children from the native communities: family-community and school.

The importance of linking the family-community to school and vice versa

Transitions are linked closely to the concept of ‘educability’ put forward by López and Tedesco (2003). Although it may sound somewhat

unattractive, this term does not necessarily refer to the ability to learn (since this is assumed to be a natural human condition), but rather to the ability to take part in the formal education process and thus access a basic level of education (López 2005).

However, in order for children to take part in the education process, ‘conditions of educability’, such as provision of resources and opportunities, must be offered both in the family and the school environment. A set of expectations is thus established on both sides.

Although families may encounter a series of problems in following their children’s education process (such as illiteracy and the lack of resources to ensure child welfare), they still have opinions on what their children’s education should be and what it should do for them. Moromizato (2007) states: “With the school, parents are hopeful that there will be a greater chance for training young Ashaninkas who are able to defend their cultural identity as leaders or rulers... For the family, ‘not knowing anything’ means not knowing how to read or write fluently, as well as not being able to account for money obtained from the sale of their products”.

Teachers expect children to start school in optimum physical and mental health. This means that families have to be able to provide children with affection, healthcare, nutrition and educational support (e.g., helping with homework, encouraging a sense of security and values at home).

Both sides have their own concept of what is expected from them and the other party. Unfortunately, a lack of understanding of the other’s problems often makes imaginary distances between

them seem greater. So how can strong bridges be built to connect families and schools? This project can provide information on the processes being carried out and the anticipated results.

Listening is an important beginning and the views of the children involved formed a major factor in the project-building process. What they like most about school is playing with their friends, listening to the teacher, drawing, doing homework and finishing it at school, learning to read and write, going out into the countryside or to the river, and visiting people doing some sort of practical work (e.g., fishing, hunting, collecting seeds).

What they like least about school is the mistreatment of children by some teachers, who punish them with sticks or whips, pull their ears or hit them with belts when they fail to do their homework or come to school late. The children do not like dirty rooms and unpainted walls, books without drawings, having to sweep the classroom, wash the floors and tables and clean the bathrooms. They also dislike other children making fun of fellow pupils' physical disabilities and they are unhappy about the lack of respect and affection shown by some of the teachers.

This information was presented in summary form and was useful in giving families and teachers food for thought in terms of what school means to the children. Raising awareness among families and teachers enabled a dialogue to be set up about the educational difficulties facing children in the communities. To achieve this, the early stages of the project gave priority to collecting information about families' expectations in relation to the school, the aspects they thought were missing from the school that would allow their children to get a better education, and the ways in which families could get actively involved with the school.

The information given by the teachers was of paramount importance as they were the key to developing new educational proposals. They contributed ideas about natural resources and resources that can be incorporated into educational activities, together with the limitations found in rural situations and native communities in the region.

The project team concluded that families and teachers shared the same concern: that children should have the best development and learning experiences, since these are the tools of future progress. However, the two groups had different ideas about the ways in which they are to be delivered and the content to be transmitted.

Since they shared the same objectives, it was not difficult to work on the differences and the idea arose to look at two main issues: a) supporting the teachers by strengthening their teaching competencies and accompanying them in building culturally relevant pedagogical processes; and b) promoting parents' participation in the educational environment, providing them with information on their children's development and learning.

Creating a new management model based on shared responsibility

The team set up a local network to give expression to community expectations about what kind of education their children will receive. The project partners (which included parents and teachers) signed a series of cooperation agreements, in which each expressed its commitment:

- The municipality is responsible for providing the resources for improving physical conditions in the schools and supporting the implementation of 'out of school' learning spaces.
- Native community leaders are to support the awareness-raising process; they contribute labour for improving school facilities and put into place community watch schemes so that no child is left out of school.
- The teachers (from the intercultural bilingual teachers' association) contribute to building a pedagogical framework that includes good teaching practices and incorporates socially and culturally relevant innovations.
- The Asociación Amazónica Andina (AAMA) supports actions for local communication and impact, with the purpose of keeping the educational problems of native community children on local government agendas.
- The Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú is helping to drive the project processes, offer technical assistance (teacher training, evaluating and monitoring results, compiling technical advice for following up innovation proposals, etc.)



According to the Amazon children project, there is no specific time or place for learning, so it is essential that children have facilities and opportunities that enrich their learning

for implementing actions in native communities and developing communication and impact actions at central government level in conjunction with AAMA.

The vital function of intercultural bilingual teachers

The reason for the emphasis on bilingual teachers in Ashaninka schools is that a community's language is more than just the set of symbols and sounds that make meaning; language is a matter of identity. Through language we construct history and build the strong emotional ties needed for us to feel accepted by our group. Therefore, for optimum learning processes to take place, this factor is absolutely vital.

The part played by bilingual teachers in the communities should be valued, as they are the leaders and agents of change. It is because of this that these teachers must have the facilities they need

to stay in the communities, they should receive greater incentives and more teaching support at grassroots level, and they should have the chance to access training programmes that enable them to update their teaching skills.

The challenge lies in finding new ways to support teachers in their educational role and developing creative and effective ways to contribute to continuous capacity building. For this reason, project staff agree with the teachers' view that the project should include a line of action that addresses 'teaching innovation.'

Teaching innovation does not mean starting from a clean slate. On the contrary, it implies having the capacity for critique and self-critique in order to evaluate what is being done, to safeguard good practice, to continue to implement activities that are working well and to change what is not working.

In this respect, the project focuses on supporting the development of the following actions:

1. Curricular diversity that is relevant, sequential and continuous

It is important to value children's learning and development in its own context, and this means in-depth study of the learning acquisition processes that happen naturally in Ashaninka children. This would identify potentially useful local elements that could be incorporated into the curricular design. Such elements would guide methods and strategies in the classroom without ignoring the educational policy guidelines already in place in the country.

2. Designing tools to evaluate learning achievements

Having information on children's learning achievements is hugely important since it provides feedback on educational processes and ensures improvements are made. These tools should not only measure aspects that we expect children to achieve at any particular level in the education system, but they should also be sensitive enough to reveal the things they already know, their 'previous learning'.

3. Improving living conditions in the schools

The challenge is to think of a school that guarantees safety, health and comfort for sound childhood development and learning, without breaking with cultural tradition. Such a school becomes a driver for a healthy way of life within the community.

4. Developing learning spaces inside and outside school

There is no specific time or place for learning, so it is essential that children have facilities and opportunities that enrich their learning. The spirit of freedom enjoyed by the children in their communities, the games they play and the experiences they have in their natural surroundings, must be used by the school to produce meaningful learning outcomes. Supplying the classrooms with educational material is absolutely vital. Although there are natural resources that become methodological resources, this is not enough when we want to achieve more complex learning outcomes with the children.

The project still has many challenges and the team are aware that they cannot address them alone.

The task is to include people and institutions (directly or indirectly) who can help to overcome the obstacles presented by state bureaucracy, to optimise training processes for bilingual early childhood education teachers, and devise methodological tools that will promote meaningful education for the children in native communities.

Finally, the problems of Amazonian children should not be the concern only of native communities but also of the whole of civil society and relevant government departments. For this to happen, the solutions proposed by the communities for promoting children's welfare and development should be given a higher profile in both the public and the private sphere, with the aim of raising awareness and influencing decision-makers at local, regional and national level.

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Local solutions for improving the quality of care and education for young Maasai children in Tanzania

Chanel Croker, Director, AMANI International and Erasto Ole Sanare, Co-ordinator, Monduli Pastoralist Development Initiative

Many governments and donors seem to regard Education For All (EFA) Goal No.1: 'Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children' as more of an option than a necessity. However, this is not the case in Monduli, a district in the Arusha region of Tanzania, where Monduli Pastoralist Development Initiatives (MPDI) is working with Maasai pastoralist communities and the Monduli District Council to improve early childhood care and education as a foundation for meeting all the EFA goals.

Over the past two years, MPDI has been sensitising communities and helping establish their own Community Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres. These centres do two things. First, they support and strengthen the informal care and education of young Maasai children in their family and community contexts. Second, they provide a point where clinic staff, school teachers and government officials can meet with community leaders, thereby enhancing co-operation and joint efforts to improve the quality of care and early education of young Maasai children.

A key guiding principle of all MPDI's work is to start with what defines the Maasai: who they are, what they know and what they want. The collaborative action, which is guided by the Maasai communities themselves, is showcasing much of what was laid out in the Dakar Framework for Action in 2000, which states that quality early childhood programmes

accomplish the following:

- include supporting care and education environments for children across the early years age range (0–8 years) in families, communities and more structured settings;
- include activities centred on the child, focused on the family, based within the community and supported by national, multi-sectoral policies and adequate resources;
- be comprehensive, focusing on all of the child's needs and encompassing health, nutrition and hygiene, and cognitive as well as social, emotional and spiritual development;
- include the education of parents and other caregivers in better child care, through building on the strengths of traditional practices;
- be developed in such a way that they are appropriate to young children and not mere downward extensions of formal school systems;
- be provided in the child's mother tongue;
- help identify and enrich the care and education of children with special needs;
- be best achieved through partnerships between governments, NGOs, communities and families.

This article provides some background to the project, based on the findings of a participatory, child-focused community research commissioned by MPDI in 2005 to inform project planning. It then looks at what has been achieved and what challenges remain to be addressed, and concludes with a discussion of what can be learned from the experiences to date.

Background

The Maasai people of northern Tanzania are traditionally nomadic pastoralists, and their historical practices of caring for and educating their children have sustained them over generations. However, the enforcement of land regulations in recent years, coupled with environmental hardships such as drought, has resulted in their having to adapt to a more settled life-style and adopt agricultural and other practices that are alien to them.

The development of social services and infrastructure to support this transition has been limited, with both clinics and schools located far from communities in areas with no transport infrastructure. As a result, these communities live in very challenging social and economic circumstances in which they not only struggle to meet their basic needs, but openly recognise that they are no longer able to meet their own standards of quality care and informal education of their children. For example, women from one community reflected on their childcare roles after walking 20 km to collect water: “We know how to care for our children, but we have no time”.

Government officials have expressed concern about the low enrolment and retention of pastoralist children in primary schools in Tanzania. Traditionally, Maasai pastoralist communities have felt little need to send their children to formal school. Institutionalised schooling has been alien to their culture and nomadic lifestyle, and of no relevance to their aspirations for their children. With their changing circumstances however, communities have become increasingly interested in sending their children to school, but they have expressed significant concerns about the quality of the school programmes.

First, the schools are often far away and the children have to walk long distances to get there. As one community member explained: “Our children have to walk almost 10 km to school. During the rainy season some areas are flooded so the children can’t get there”. Because children must leave home very early, teachers note: “Children are weak at school because they do not have any breakfast and they receive no food until they get home”. In reality, therefore, children often do not enrol in school until they are 9 or 10 years of age.

As one mother emphasised: “If we have a choice, we like our children to start school later, because it’s too far for 7-year-olds”.

In addition, with limited basic school infrastructure, children are expected to contribute water and firewood from the home supplies, adding to the women’s workload. As one mother explained: “If you don’t give water and firewood for your children to take to school, they will not go”.

At the local government level, District Council officials have acknowledged that because they have not been able to provide enough schools (and clinics) close to communities, the attendance of 7 and 8-year-olds is limited, and any plans for developing school-based pre-primary programmes for 5 to 6-year-olds, as per the national policy, are compromised.

The physical distance between communities and schools also contributes to the fact that there is little or no interaction between them. As a result, the school programmes and approaches may have little relevance to the Maasai communities they serve. One community research team member noted: “There seems to be nothing in the school culture that indicates any thinking about the visions the pastoralists have for their children... it looks like kids are just picked up out of their community culture and dropped into the school culture”. Alternatively, as one male community member suggested, if schools could be located close to their community then this situation could be changed, because “communities can be more involved in the school, and the school can learn from the community”.

Research therefore indicated that community members and government officials shared common aspirations to improve the access, retention and success of Maasai children in school, and that this could be achieved through a two-pronged approach. First by communities and service providers working together to strengthen and support informal care and education in the family and community contexts, and second to build on this foundation to improve the quality and relevance of primary school programmes. Whilst elders were very concerned that formal education should build on their culture and not replace it, they were not aware that some



Photo: Chanel Croker

As a primary teacher says: “Children are used to interacting with others at the early childhood centres, and they have been introduced to Swahili, so they are more confident when they start school.”

teachers and government officials already recognised the importance of Maasai children’s informal education and culture. As two Maasai Head Teachers highlighted: “We need both informal and formal education together, because if we do not keep our culture then we will not have the confidence to get involved in formal education”. In this context, one elder articulated what community leaders agreed was the common challenge for communities and government officials alike: “Is it possible to bring both formal and informal education together to develop a person who is confident in both?”

When community members and local- and national-level government officials discussed the findings of the community research at an open forum, it was agreed that this common challenge also inspired coordinated collaborative action for improving the quality of care and early education of young Maasai children in families, communities and schools in Monduli.

Achievements and challenges

There have been a number of significant achievements. When this project started in October 2005, there were five pre-schools in the ward, two based at primary schools and three in communities, involving a total of 180 children between the ages of four and seven. Now, there are 34 Community ECD Centres, involving 1,818 children, and there is already an increase in the number of Maasai children in school. As one primary teacher explained: “We have more children enrolling in Standard One now. They are used to interacting with others at the ECD Centres, and they have been introduced to Swahili, so they are more confident when they start school”.

As a result of MPDI’s awareness-raising at dispensaries and clinics, local healthcare service providers are reaching more young children and their families than before. Some providers are attending the Community ECD Centres on a regular basis to monitor children’s health and offer

healthcare and health education services. As a result, MPDI field staff have noted that clinic staff are developing more positive relationships with Maasai women and children, and community members are becoming more aware of and open to 'outside' healthcare advice and medicine for their children.

Indeed, the Centres have become such an integral part of community culture and events that MPDI field staff recognise that they "are much more than centres for children, they are community centres and meeting points. Even government officials say that nowadays communicating with communities is much easier because they can meet them at the ECD Centres".

Four community ECD Centres that are more than 10 km from a school have become 'Satellite Schools'. This means that at government request the programmes have been expanded to include Primary Standard 1 and 2 classes for 7 and 8-year-old children. Whilst government has nominated teachers for these programmes, communities have taken the lead in building temporary facilities for the classes and are highly motivated by the prospect that they are in the process of developing their own community primary schools. Recently, the Monduli District Council has included ECD issues in its plans and budget, including a contribution for a monthly allowance to pay community-nominated ECD Centre 'teachers'.

Whilst the Monduli District Council and the neighboring district have called on MPDI to expand this programme, Monduli District has also been proposed as a pilot area for a national integrated ECD initiative.

Several challenges remain. Communities are pressing for even higher contributions from the district council towards teachers' pay and training, as well as food and water provision at the Centres in times of emergency. Funding limitations are holding back progress in documentation of community knowledge, beliefs and practices to inform local curriculum and resources development; in capitalising on the opportunity to work in partnership with the national curriculum development institute in developing local curricula, resources and training programmes; and to expand the programme to other wards and districts.

Progress is also limited by a lack of professional capacity in early childhood development in Tanzania, and delays in implementing the National Poverty Reduction Strategy's commitment to "Develop an inter-sectoral policy framework to guide early childhood development and pre-school learning". This makes it hard to mobilise donor funding for early childhood support.

Assessment and lessons learned

The strength of the achievements to date rests on the fact that local communities' ownership of and commitment to their ECD Centres is very strong. Community ECD Centres are based in the community, run by a community-nominated 'teacher' with grandmothers as resource people, and they are designed, constructed, maintained and managed locally. They offer clear benefits to parents as well as children. As a women's group explained: "At least now we have a place for the children to play and be safe while we are looking for water".

Decentralised and flexible approaches to programme development, steered by communities themselves and realized through ongoing processes of consultation and negotiation between stakeholders, have been vital to success. At the same time, it has been very important to integrate the project into local government structures right from the planning stage. As a result, government officials are very supportive of these initiatives as integral to their work.

The ongoing effort to research and document Maasai community knowledge, beliefs and practices about informal early care and education, although limited, has provided a significant motivation to communities. At the same time, local teacher trainers are inspired by the fact that there appear to be strong links between the Maasai traditional approaches to supporting children's learning and their new participatory approaches to teacher training.

Sensitisation at both primary school and community levels has helped the ECD Centres to bridge the social and cultural divide between the Maasai and the formal school system. Whilst the Community ECD Centres operate in the Maasai language, they also introduce the national (and school) language of Swahili as preparation for the transition to formal school. As a result, primary schools have become

very supportive of the Community ECD Centres as a foundation for strengthening children's informal care and education as well as preparing them for successful entry into primary school. The growing relationships between communities and schools through Community ECD Centres is also providing an important platform for schools to work with communities to improve the relevance of their programmes and be better prepared to support the transition of young Maasai children to school.

MPDI is now working to strengthen partnerships between communities, the District Council and the local teacher training college to develop locally appropriate parenting education programmes and curricula, training guidelines and resource materials for the community ECD Centres and the early primary classes. As one Maasai teacher explained: "School culture is Swahili culture. By developing teaching and learning resources based on Maasai culture, Maasai children will be proud of who they are and proud to be learning Swahili at the same time". In this context, it is highly significant that the national institute responsible for curriculum development has recently proposed a shift from a centralised approach to a more participatory, community-informed approach to curriculum development.

Through this project, both pastoralist communities and government officials have realised that they share common goals for local solutions to improve the quality of young Maasai children's early care and education, at home and at school. Together they also recognise that these goals can only be achieved through committed partnerships between families, communities, local government leaders, ward and district officials, and health and education professionals, and that are must also be well supported by national-level policies, guidelines and resources.

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In practice

Low-cost ways of improving quality in early childhood education

Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is a worthy aim. But how do you achieve it when financial resources are scarce to non-existent? This article shares some ideas of Christina Peeters, a consultant specialising in early childhood education who spent several months with the People's Rural Education Movement (PREM), a partner of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in the Indian state of Orissa.

Established in 1984, PREM works for the socio-economic empowerment of rural indigenous tribes through networks of community-based grassroots organisations. Many tribal peoples, who comprise 22 percent of Orissa's population, suffered from being forced from their traditional lands by economic development during the 20th century, and government schemes intended to alleviate their situation have not often reached an adequate impact.

The Indian government's pre-school programme does not, in practice, reach many pre-school children in tribal areas. Primary education is conducted in Oriya, a language to which most tribal children have not previously been exposed, and its culture and value system is frequently alien to tribal communities. Less than a quarter of tribal children in Orissa complete primary education, compared to two-fifths among the rest of the state's inhabitants.

In the Child-Based Community Development project implemented by PREM and supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, there is an emphasis on awareness-raising, parent education, community mobilisation, pre-school education and the transition to school. The project, initiated in 2007, aims initially at establishing pre-school centres in 350 tribal villages. In the longer term, the aim is to showcase a model that can be taken up by local governments to reach more tribal children.

It was with a view to enhance the development of this model that the foundation asked her to observe how these newly-started rural pre-school centres were operating. Based on her experiences, the following are eight thoughts on simple, low-cost ways of improving quality.

1. Separate the toddlers from the pre-schoolers

I observed many situations in which children from 2 to 6 were expected to play in the same space, because their teachers were not aware that children have very differing needs at different stages in their development. Frequently, the play degenerated into fighting and the teachers could only try to keep the peace. Toddlers (aged 2 or 3) mostly play individually and need a safe haven, whereas pre-schoolers (aged 4 to 6) are becoming social and need interaction. Ideally toddlers should be separated from pre-schoolers into a safe haven area for them to play without being disturbed by the older children. When this happens for the first time, the toddlers will cry for an hour or two at being separated from their older siblings. But it is well worth persevering to get past this stage.

2. Encourage teachers to develop their own creativity

Teachers can hardly be expected to nurture confident self-expression and creativity in young children if those qualities aren't very well developed in their own personalities. At one teacher training



Photo: Jim Holmes

According to Christina Peeters, teachers can hardly be expected to nurture confident self-expression and creativity in young children if those qualities aren't very well developed in their own personalities

session I observed a great sense of revelation among preschool teachers, after their initial reluctance, when the facilitator gave them paper and crayons and asked them to make drawings of their home villages. Many of the teachers had never drawn anything. Teacher training should also involve encouraging teachers to make up songs, to dance, to tell stories, to make handicrafts and model with clay, and so forth.

3. Encourage teachers to role-play and discuss

Where resources are scarce, teachers tend to have either no or inadequate training. Role-playing exercises can be a quick and effective way to get teachers to think about how situations look through the eyes of a child, but they need to be done properly. That means getting a group to observe the role-playing exercise, and afterwards discuss how effectively the “teacher” in the role-play was able to communicate or demonstrate activities to the “children” or to meet a particular child’s individual needs.

4. Get children practising their use of language

Using language is closely related to the socialisation process, so teachers should try hard to encourage children to speak more confidently – especially in cultures where parents do not tend to talk to their children, so they join pre-school either silent or speaking only quietly and using very few words. Simple techniques include telling stories through use of drama, so that children participate in the telling; drawing pictures and asking children to make up a story that explains the picture; and asking things like “tell me the names of other children who are wearing some red in their clothes today”, or “tell me the names of some square things you can see in the classroom”.

5. Ensure every child says something every day

Children who are not encouraged when they hesitate to join in an activity can quickly get into the habit of dropping out. Playing a simple game of calling out names once every day, in which the teacher can go around the group and make sure that every child in

turn says at least something out loud, can gradually build their confidence and encourage valuable playful interaction among all the children.

6. Combine storytelling with physical movements

It's a good idea to creatively combine storytelling with activities that involve the children in moving their bodies, interacting and playing. For example: "What noise does a cat make? Who can prowl like a cat? What noise does a mouse make? Who can be as small as a mouse? Play a cat chasing a mouse. Who can roar like a tiger? Who can jump like a tiger? Who can fly like a bird? Pretend you're a bird sleeping in the tree. Who can stand on their toes and reach up to the stars?" And so on.

7. Be creative in finding things to use as toys

The teachers I worked with were not always aware of the importance of play, or that toddlers need to train their eye-hand co-ordination by gripping things and using the muscles in their arms, hands and fingers at the same time. Often toys can be found without too much cost. With one group of toddlers I found a basin to fill with sieved sand, and sourced inexpensive items such as spoons, tea-strainers, funnels and little cups. The toddlers quickly became intensely concentrated in play, happily repeating and trying out movements with the sand for hours without getting bored – much to the surprise of their teachers. When the pre-schoolers in turn were given the sand to play with, they enjoyed making up games such as building nests for birds and baking imaginary sand-cakes.

8. Use materials that feature what children know

I saw some pre-school centres in rural areas that had charts on the walls featuring fruits and vegetables that the children knew nothing about because they were only available at more urban markets, not in their small tribal village. Wherever possible, it is always best to base toys, learning and teaching materials around items that will be familiar to children from their daily life and local culture.

Early childhood education in Latin America

Working towards quality and equity

Dr. Gaby Fujimoto, Senior Education Specialist, Organization of American States

The objective of access to primary education for all in Latin America remains to be achieved, with the figure standing at 95 percent in 2005 (UNESCO, 2008). Despite the efforts invested over recent decades, the main group of young children (aged between 0 and 8 years) who lack provision, quality, equity, relevance and efficiency of comprehensive educational, healthcare and social welfare services are those living in indigenous, rural and border villages.

The will to change this situation is the principal reason behind the project 'Trends in transition policies in rural, indigenous and border communities', set up in 2007. The project is being developed by the Organization of American States (OAS) and by partner organisations of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela, and the Central University of Chile.

The project places special emphasis on intervention in education and early childhood care, and is intended to complement the member States' efforts to design, improve, monitor and evaluate policies and strategies aimed at increasing provision of education and improving the quality and equity of education, care and development of children up to the age of 8 years. The aim is to improve the transition from the home into early childhood education (pre-school or nursery) and then into primary education.

The first few months of the project focused on collecting and consolidating existing information in participating countries. It is anticipated that this will lead to a process of multi-sector analysis and assessment of regional policy and early childhood education trends.

The basic questions on which the research is focused are:

- What is the trend for early childhood policy formation, in terms of the transitions selected and within the focus groups studied?
- What conditions in which the respective transitions take place might impact on strengthening quality education in the focus groups studied?

The results obtained from this analysis and the activities aimed at building institutional capacity in the area of early childhood and primary education are shared in a virtual observatory on transitions and quality of education provision for small children¹. It is hoped that other countries will use the information to promote and implement transition policies.

Initial data: the overall situation

In June 2007, the five participating countries held their first meeting in Santiago de Chile and were joined by representatives from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Department of Education and Culture of the OAS.

At the event, the participants reviewed the information gathered from the study countries on the general situation regarding the care of young children and the context of transition policies. Some countries had more information available than others. The participants found most problems in accessing information on itinerant groups and younger age children (0 to 3 years), highlighting the need to cross-reference information and, in some cases, undertake specific studies. Common indicators were population size and the levels of provision of early

childhood education (focused mainly on ages 3 to 6 years), primary education and poverty. However, indicators relating to transition processes were not easily obtainable, with the most common ones (linked to inadequate transition) being rates of school dropout and repetition.

Some general conclusions drawn:

- Early childhood education provision is unable to cover potential demand; e.g., in Colombia in 2003, only 35 percent of children aged less than 5 years attended some kind of educational institution.
- Provision is greater in older age groups; e.g. in Peru there is provision for 4.3 percent of children aged between 0 and 2 years, 41.5 percent of 3-year-olds, 66 percent of 4-year-olds and 61 percent of 5-year-olds. In Venezuela, there is provision for 94 percent of children aged between 7 and 8 years, 85 percent for children between 4 and 6 years and only 21 percent for those aged less than 3 years.
- Provision in rural areas is lower than in urban areas; e.g., in Peru the figure is 45 percent in rural and 66 percent in urban areas.
- Provision in poor sectors is lower than in sectors where income is higher.
- The indigenous population has a higher poverty rate than the mixed-race or white population. This sector also has lower school attendance and a lower educational level than is laid down in Ministry of Education regulations;
- Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela have specific fairness policies that address the rural and indigenous population.

Following the meeting, the project teams prepared an initial report on the project findings, progress and the need to link to quality policies and this was presented at the 5th Meeting of the Education Ministers from the OAS Member States, held at the end of 2007 in Cartagena, Colombia.

The political impact factor

The project brings together a range of committed and qualified people who can work together to attract the political will needed to place early childhood care and education at the top of the political agenda. The 5th Meeting of the Education Ministers was one of several meetings that have

already been held. As a result of the event, the Ministers adopted a formal 'Hemispheric Commitment to Early Childhood Education', in which they agreed to work together with other sectors, international organisations and civil society to achieve several objectives, including in the long-term, the universalisation of early childhood care and education.

This commitment provided a basis for drawing up the Inter-American Committee on Education (CIE) 2007–2009 Work Plan. The CIE represents ministries and ensures implementation of decisions taken at Education Ministers' and Summit of the Americas meetings.

In conclusion

Early childhood education is coming to the fore in the formation of social and education policy in Latin American countries. Children aged between 3 and 6 years are gradually getting better access to early childhood education through a range of formal and non-formal programmes. However, current processes of social and economic change, such as increasing migration and marginalisation of certain sectors of the population, are impeding progress in many countries. There is a danger that these changes, instead of enhancing the role of early childhood education, will accentuate the inequality gap. There is a need for greater attention to equity of access through valuing different cultures and taking account of issues such as identity, sense of belonging and use of local resources.

The current project can make a significant contribution to advancing the quality and fairness of care for the region's most vulnerable children. From this can emerge new policies, better programmes and better theoretical and practical knowledge of the subject. This can lead to improved child development and a better transition through the school system; a core purpose aspired to by all countries in the region.

Note

1 <http://observatoriotrancionesinfancia.org>

References

UNESCO 2008. Education For All 2008 Monitoring Report. Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

The Child Town project

Quality assessment in practice

Rosângela Guerra, journalist, with the collaboration of Silmara Soares and Tião Rocha, CPCD, Brazil

“You need a whole village to educate a child” sums up the aim behind the Child Town (*Cidade Criança*) project, run by the Brazilian non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Popular Centre for Culture and Development (CPCD)¹.

The Child Town project is a platform for social change that integrates hitherto independently developed and somewhat isolated actions and programmes in the areas of services, childcare and education for infants and school-age children. The project has been running since 2005 in Araçuaí, a municipality located in the state of Minas Gerais, in the Jequitinhonha valley, one of Brazil’s poorest regions. Child Town encourages the valley’s inhabitants to treat all community spaces as locations where young children can have a social life, learn and explore their opportunities safely. To make this possible, the project has built a network of people from different generations who fulfil various tasks. Mothers and carers, community education agents, nursery and infant school educators are involved, all of whom are well qualified to promote the principles of the project in a co-operative and committed way.

Work planning and monitoring applied in day-to-day activities

Since its early beginnings in 1984, the CPCD has developed into an institution for learning. After defining its aims and forming its pedagogical principles, the organisation went on to produce mechanisms for measuring, monitoring and evaluating learning. It is important to stress that each of these mechanisms is not only an essential work tool but also a tool for evaluating the project’s day-to-day activities. This systematic application is vital, as it enables children’s daily progress, however slight, to be detected and followed through, as well as enabling greater coverage and understanding of Child Town objectives among the wider community.

The Work and Evaluation Plan

Each year, work on the project begins by collectively producing the Work and Evaluation Plan (WEP). In the early days, this was drawn up by the team of educators, but with time, it was enriched by contributions from all those involved. Their daily discoveries and challenges stimulated their desire to put forward and share solutions to problems and ideas for new activities.

An example of the WEP in action can be seen in the educators’ efforts to involve the community in project activities. These include evening walks with pregnant women, walking tours around the community with the children, crop growing in the market garden, massage for babies, play workshops, storytelling and guitar sessions. The villagers have also learned to make cough mixtures and other preparations from medicinal plants. Many of these activities encourage self-respect, self-esteem, appreciation and affection between members of the community, attributes that are especially important for young children. For pre-school children, project activities help to smooth the transition from home to school life.

Learning Results and Process Monitoring (LRPM)

This is carried out on a monthly basis together with families, the community, educators and particularly with pregnant women and children aged up to five years. The LRPM mechanism allows educators to keep an eye on changes in a child’s behaviour, observe their development and respond to their personal needs. Using the LRPM mechanism allowed the team to discover several positive outcomes from Child Town activities:

- The number of children breastfeeding up to the age of 6 months increased by 100 percent.
- The use of medicinal tea, cough mixture and anti-lice shampoo helped address the children’s most common health problems.

- The number of malnourished and underweight children fell considerably.
- The family-to-school transition process occurred smoothly.

Project quality indicators

One of the greatest challenges facing the CPCD was to produce a set of project quality indicators that were both specific and measurable. This was particularly difficult since the team needed to measure intangible outcomes such as self-esteem, learning through play, happiness and pleasure.

Self-esteem indicators can be derived from field notes and include personal care (combing hair, bathing, etc.), care of clothing and personal possessions, appreciation of beauty, expressing opinions and tastes, taking a prominent role in meetings, willingness to help and take part in collective actions, and appropriate expression of smiles and tears. All these factors are specific and observable on a day-to-day basis and are fundamental to planning and carrying out project actions.

The project team used the same strategy for each of the specific objectives: learning, socialising, citizenship, participation, etc. They reached a consensus (this was important) and set 12 Project Quality Indicators (see box in next page). The 12 factors can be observed and measured individually, but also complement each other. For the CPCD, the interaction and sum of all 12 factors provides an indication of the overall quality and success of a project.

Measurement of the 12 factors is based on a series of specific questions for each participant (educators, children, community education agents, care assistants, mothers and other members of the community). The questions guide the participant to consider each of the factors within the context of the project activities as a whole. For example, to measure the degree of co-operation, educators are asked such questions as:

- Is there an absence of competitiveness between members?
- Is there teamwork and a convivial atmosphere? What has been done to improve non-competitiveness?

- Does competitiveness in play contribute to improving or hindering relationships? How is this issue managed?
- Do respect and solidarity increase or decrease? What is it like at home, at school, in the community?

For the same indicators, the questions would be put differently to children and adapted to suit the way they express themselves, for example:

- Do people cooperate around here or do they fight?
- How do people work: in groups or everyone on their own? And you, how do you join in?
- Are the games and play activities competitive? Does this help or not?
- Where do you think there is more co-operation: here in the project, at home or at school? Why?

CPCD has been applying PQIs in many of its projects since 1995. They are now considered social technology and were awarded a prize by the Banco de Tecnologias Sociais da Fundação Banco do Brasil in 2005.

Systematising qualitative monitoring and evaluation systems

Qualitative monitoring and evaluation through the comprehensive use of process and impact micro-indicators (WEP and LRPM) together with product and results macro-indicators (PQI), have had a positive influence on improving the work done and on achieving forecast objectives and goals in the Child Town and other CPCD projects.

In practice, this has meant that educators are reading and analysing the indicators (both micro and macro) in their training and day-to-day activities, and this has now become common practice. For example, educators have formed groups to discuss the harmony, or mutual respect indicator.

The evaluation of WEP, LRPM and PQI is carried out objectively through discussion groups with members of the community. To ensure people are not overwhelmed with excessive questioning, the activities are normally carried out on an informal basis. Emphasis is placed on listening and recording the

The CPCD 12 Project Quality Indicators (PQI)

1. Appropriation: *Balance between what is desired and what is achieved.*

This indicator invites us to follow a watching brief, to not enforce education, to respect learning stages and the rate at which each individual processes knowledge.

2. Coherence: *Relationship between theory and practice.*

Indicates the importance of a balanced relationship between formal, academic knowledge and non-formal, empirical knowledge. It shows that both are important because they are relative and therefore complementary.

3. Cooperation: *Team spirit, solidarity.*

This indicator urges us to co-operate with others working in an educational role. This includes promoting the issue of solidarity as the basis for teaching and learning, as well as accepting the different needs of individuals.

4. Creativity: *Innovation, entertainment and leisure.*

This indicator drives us to create new approaches and to dare to move away from more old-fashioned academic teaching methods. This indicator gave rise to a new teaching tool: in how many 'different and innovative ways' (DIW) can the whole community get involved in caring for its children.

5. Dynamism: *The ability to change according to need.*

This indicator invites us to recognise our different needs and accept that we are on a continuous quest for complementarity. We are born to be complete but not perfect individuals.

6. Efficiency: *Identifying the end and the need.*

This indicator invites us to balance our energies by providing the proper means and resources to fulfil planned outcomes. The four pillars of learning are: a) learning how to be, b) learning how to do, c) learning how to know, and d) learning how to live together.

7. Aesthetics: *Refers to beauty and refined taste.*

This indicator concerns the search for the brighter side of life. If, according to Domenico di Masi, "aesthetics is the ethics of the future", we need to reconstruct a concept of aesthetics that acknowledges humanity's spiritual side as the source and creative force of beauty and light.

8. Happiness: *Feeling good about what we have and who we are.*

This indicator reminds us of the unfaltering quest for being fortunate (and not for happiness) that is the *raison d'être* of the human race.

9. Harmony: *Mutual respect.*

This indicator stands for understanding and generous acceptance of others as part of our ongoing learning process, and also of the benefits of making the past and the future part of the present.

10. Opportunity: *The options open to us.*

This indicator presents the contemporary view of development (creating opportunities) as a means and an alternative to building social capital. The more opportunities we are able to create for children and adolescents taking part in our projects, the more options will be open to them for achieving their potential and their dreams.

11. Taking the lead: *Taking an active part in making fundamental decisions.*

This indicator deals with our ongoing ability to face challenges; break down barriers; push the limits; put our knowledge, actions and desires to the test; stay ahead of our time; and be fully involved in shaping the future for our fellow human beings. What can each of us do? Which group, school, country and society do we want to be an active member of?

12. Transformation: *Moving from one state to a better one.*

This indicator translates our mission from passive participants in the world to agents of change, whose responsibility is to leave the world in a better state for future generations than that it is at present.



The Child Town project encourages the valley's inhabitants to treat all community spaces as locations where young children can have a social life, learn and explore their opportunities safely

views of all project participants, whether they are educators, children, mothers, fathers or other members of the community.

Currently, for the Child Town project and for others managed by CPCD, instruments for planning (WEP), monitoring (LRPM), measuring quality (PQI) and innovation (DIW), are fundamental in guaranteeing that all children, no matter where they come from, can have access to learning adapted to their age and ability, especially in the transitional phase between family and school life.

Note

- 1 The CPCD (Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento) is a non-governmental non-profit organisation located in Minas Gerais, in southeast Brazil. Founded in 1984, the CPCD's mission is to promote local people's education and community development through culture. Its work has received national and international recognition for its quality benchmarking and its example of an alternative method of implementing public policy. For more information, please see the website, www.cpcd.org.br.

Further reading

Websites

UNESCO – Education

Early childhood education has vast potential for human development and is vital to achieving Education For All. As learning begins at birth and continues throughout life, UNESCO's goal is to assist countries in expanding access to early childhood education, improving its quality and ensuring equity at this vital stage.

<http://portal.unesco.org/education/en>

Education For All (EFA) - Global Monitoring Report

The annual Global Monitoring Report is the publication on progress that countries and agencies are making towards the EFA goals, providing the latest data available alongside in-depth analysis.

The 2008 edition, *'Education for all by 2015: Will we make it?'* is a mid-term assessment of where the world stands on its commitment to provide basic education for all children, youth and adults by 2015.

<http://www.efareport.unesco.org>

Global campaign for education

The Global Campaign for Education promotes education as a basic human right, and mobilizes public pressure on governments and the international community to fulfil their promises to provide free, compulsory public basic education for all people; in particular for children, women and all disadvantaged, deprived sections of society.

The campaign is driven by the conviction that quality education for all is achievable, and by the concern for the immense costs of failure.

www.campaignforeducation.org

ECA WebWatch

ECA WebWatch is an eclectic mix of the best websites and information on: early childhood development, growth and learning; early childhood practice, programs and policy; and emerging issues and research. It is a service provided by Early Childhood Australia, an early childhood advocacy organisation seeking to ensure quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children from birth to eight years.

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/early_childhood_news/eca_webwatch.html

ERICDigests.org

This site provides one way to access the ERIC Digests (education articles) produced by the former ERIC Clearinghouse system. It gives access to full-text access to thousands of ERIC Digests in many education areas including teaching, learning, special education, home schooling, etc.

www.ericdigests.org/

Publications

Strategies for reaching the EFA goal on early childhood care and education (ECCE)

UNESCO Policy Brief on Early Childhood
N° 42 / January – March 2008

Lack of early childhood care and education programmes and uneven pre-primary education are two major problems highlighted in the efa Global Monitoring Report 2008. This Policy Brief emphasizes a crucial resource to alleviate the lack of ECCE programmes – parents, the primary educators of young children everywhere.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001586/158687e.pdf>

A human rights-based approach to education for all
UNICEF/UNESCO, 2007

Current thinking and practice in the education sector are presented along with a framework for rights-based policy and programme development. This joint UNESCO-UNICEF publication is intended to guide dialogue between United Nations Development Group and Education For All partnerships and facilitate a breakthrough from 'right to education' rhetoric to accelerated interventions for attaining the EFA goals and the Millennium Development Goals related to education.

www.unicef.org/publications/index_42104.html

Starting strong II: Early childhood education and care

OECD, 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 field. In their conclusion, the authors identify ten policy areas for further critical attention from governments.

www.oecd.org/document/63/0,3343,en_2649_201185_37416703_1_1_1_1,00.html

A global call to action for early childhood

Coordinators' Notebook, No 29, 2007

The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Education

This document emphasizes the urgent need for investment in early childhood programmes. These investments will ensure for improved health, nutrition, education, as well as acknowledgement of child rights and equality, especially among the most disadvantaged children. The paper advocates for cost-effective early childhood programmes to be placed as a priority for global development.

www.ecdgroup.com/docs/lib_005322111.pdf

Quality improvement principles: A framework for local authorities and national organisations to improve quality outcomes for children and young people

National Quality Improvement Network, 2007

National Children's Bureau, UK

This publication is the result of a work programme that included developing a set of good practice principles for local authorities. It has been developed by the National Quality Improvement Network, a National Children's Bureau network in United Kingdom. The network believes that the 12 principles will be particularly useful to enable local authorities and national organisations to deliver their vision for setting quality, adding colour, innovation and creativity to the UK national framework.

www.ncb.org.uk/dotpdf/open_access_2/imqu_final.pdf

More and better education: What makes effective learning in schools, in literacy and early childhood development programs?

ADEA, 2007

This document is an account of the proceedings of 2006 ADEA (Association for the Development of Education in Africa) Biennale on Education in Africa which was held in Libreville, Gabon, March 27-31, 2006.

www.adeanet.org/downloadcenter/JustRelease/bien_06_rap_en.pdf

Informing transitions in the early years

Aline-Wendy Dunlop, Hilary Fabian

Open University Press, McGraw-Hill Education, 2006

This book explores early transitions from a variety of international perspectives. Each chapter is informed by rigorous research and makes recommendations on how education professionals can better understand and support transitions in the early years.

<http://mcgraw-hill.co.uk/openup/>

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.

Bernard van Leer  Foundation

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