



What approaches to linking ECCE and primary education?

Introduction

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) provides an important foundation for later learning, and is an integral part of lifelong learning. In keeping with EFA orientations, governments and education providers need to ensure smooth transitions from ECCE to primary school so that the gains made in the former will be firmly sustained in the latter. This brief outlines the new contexts that have prompted increased policy attention to this issue, and reviews two current sets of approaches to the transition challenge.

Evolving contexts

The growing policy attention given to early childhood services and primary education stems from three inter-related contexts. First is the expansion of ECCE programmes, which has now become a world-wide trend. The global pre-primary gross enrolment ratio grew from 33% to 40% between 1999 and 2005, and all the world regions recorded an increase in this ratio: 10% to 14% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 15% to 17% in the Arab States, 40% to 43% in East Asia and the Pacific, 56% to 62% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 76% to 79% in North America and Western Europe.¹ In OECD countries, by 2000, most children participated in ECCE programmes for at least two years before starting compulsory schooling.²

Second, policy debates increasingly highlight the role of ECCE in nurturing important dispositions and attitudes towards learning, in supporting educational achievement, in reducing the need for remedial education and in improving the internal efficiency of primary education. Much of the research evidence on these themes comes from North America and Western Europe, but a growing body of similar research is found in developing countries, such as Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Turkey, India, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Myanmar.³ Economists, including the Nobel Prize winner and economist James Heckman, have argued that the most productive form of educational investment is in children below compulsory school age.⁴

Third, the attention of governments is shifting from enrolling children in school to ensuring the successful *completion* of primary education by all children. Despite considerable progress, this remains a distant reality, particularly in developing countries. Of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with data available, 11 have Grade One repetition rates over 20%. The rates in several Latin America countries are over 10%. The highest drop-out rates occurs in Grade One, with 10.8% in South and West Asia, 9.3% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 4.9% in Latin America in 2005.⁵ Improvements particularly in the early grades, supported by preschool

participation, are regarded as policy imperatives in the quest of universal primary education.

Different histories, different traditions

Effective linkages between ECCE and primary education can be difficult to achieve, given the divergences between the two traditions. Primary schools are well-established and relatively uniform institutions, which became part of national education systems as early as the end of the 19th century. In contrast, programmes for young children evolved more slowly, with family and maternal care as the usual means of childcare until most of the 20th century.⁶ Centre-based ECCE programmes, such as kindergartens and daycare, are more recent institutions, with less uniformity in terms of aims, organisation, content and approaches, training, funding and responsible sectors. As a result, features of the two sectors can diverge widely: holistic development, play- and activity-based pedagogy, emphasis on process, flexibility, a mix of contextualised and decontextualised learning in ECCE versus formal learning, didactic teaching, adjustment of the child to the demands of schools, rigidity, and emphasis on outcomes in primary school.⁷

Ready children, ready school

Two well-known approaches to transition from ECCE into primary education are 'school readiness' and 'ready schools'. The former stresses the role of ECCE in promoting children's development and adapting them to the practice and environment of primary school. The approach involves the identification of characteristics that individual children should display if they are to be considered 'ready for school'. The research consensus today is that school readiness includes development in five distinct but interconnected areas: (1) child health and physical development, (2) social and emotional development, (3) approaches to learning (e.g. enthusiasm, curiosity, persistence), (4) language and communicative skills, and (5) cognitive development and general knowledge (e.g. cognitive and problem-solving skills, such as learning to observe and to note similarities and differences).⁸ While it provides a benchmark for ECCE staff, the school readiness approach can involve certain risks, e.g. privileging literacy and numeracy skills over others, placing excessive responsibility on children and their families for school success, and failure to recognise children's individual differences.

On the other hand, the 'ready schools' approach emphasises the school's adaptation to the child's developmental needs. It focuses on the accessibility of primary schools as well as characteristics of the school environment that can encourage or hinder learning. It recognises that schools carry a major responsibility for readiness and gives attention to aspects such as school leadership and environment, curricula, teacher training and support, and parental and community

¹ UNESCO, 2006. EFA Global Monitoring Report. Strong Foundations.

² OECD, 2001. Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care.

³ UNESCO, Ibid.

⁴ Moss, 2008. What future for the relationship between ECEC and compulsory schooling? RCIE, Vol. 3, No. 3.

⁵ UNESCO, 2008. EFA Global Monitoring Report. Overcoming inequality.

⁶ OECD, 2006. Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care.

⁷ Landers & Myers, 1989, for the 5th CGECCD meeting, UNESCO Paris.

⁸ UNESCO, 2006. Ibid.

involvement.⁹ Successful transition entails overcoming factors such as: unaffordable and physically inaccessible schools, large and overcrowded classes, the presence of many over-aged and under-aged children, poorly trained and rewarded teachers, inadequate methods addressing the difference in language spoken at home and school, insufficient learning materials and unhealthy settings.¹⁰ It also advocates that the first years of primary school adopt pedagogical methods and materials used in ECCE in order to facilitate transition and make primary schools more welcoming for children.¹¹

Pre-primary and social pedagogy approaches

OECD (2006) refers to the 'pre-primary approach to early education' and the 'social pedagogy tradition' as two distinct approaches to promoting a unified approach to learning across the sectors. Resembling much the 'school readiness' approach, the former focuses on aligning early childhood education with the aims, requirements and practice of primary school. Emphasis is placed on acquiring knowledge and skills useful for schooling (e.g. literacy, math and scientific thinking) as well as discipline-based and sequential learning typically adopted in primary schools. It favours the formulation of programme standards and the definition of expected child outcomes, i.e. what children should know and be able to do after attending preschool. Found in many English- and French-speaking countries, the 'pre-primary approach' is often favoured by parents because of its emphasis on learning, including early reading and writing skills. However, it is greeted with caution by some researchers for its risk of stigmatising children, especially those from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The 'social pedagogy tradition' considers ECCE as a broad preparation for life, focusing on assisting children in their current developmental tasks and interests. Concerns for children's "here and now" are as important as supporting their future educational performance. A broad concept of pedagogy, encompassing care, upbringing and learning without hierarchy, is adopted. There is a view that promoting children's initiatives and meaning-making strongly supports their cognitive development. National curriculum frameworks contain orientations to guide the activities and life of the ECCE centre, rather than prescribing outcomes. Cooperative project work is much used to stimulate children's interest in working together and to encourage shared and complex understandings of selected themes. This tradition acknowledges that some of the strengths of early childhood practice – e.g. attention to health and well-being, the natural learning strategies of the child¹² – should be reflected at least in the first years of primary school. Found in Nordic and some Central European countries, the approach is enabled by a low child:adult ratio and well trained staff, i.e. by conditions that are difficult to realise in certain contexts.

Conclusions

Regardless of the pedagogical approach adopted, various strategies can support continuity and a smooth transition for children from early childhood to primary education. Some upstream strategies include: administrative integration of

early childhood education within the education system; the development and use of an integrated curriculum linking early childhood and primary education goals, content and methods; common teacher training and qualification schemes for early childhood and primary school educators; an appropriate language policy encouraging a common approach to the use of languages in ECCE and primary school in multilingual environments (preferably towards the use of mother tongue); pre-primary or preschool classes that bridge ECCE and primary education programmes; regulations that impose cooperation between ECCE and school institutions in countries without structurally integrated arrangements; lowering the official starting age of compulsory education; and preparatory "crash courses" for children who have never attended organised ECCE.

More relational strategies are also needed to improve children's experiences when moving from ECCE to primary school. These may include transferring classmates together to the same primary classrooms; conducting information meetings for parents about life and activities in primary schools; requiring schools and kindergartens to work together to prepare transition and to meet transition challenges; organising visits to primary schools for children and parents; providing opportunities for primary teachers to get to know the prospective entrants through visits to families and ECCE programmes; and having the same teacher or group of teachers follow and support children and their progress across the transition years.

In sum, efforts are needed both to support the learning and well-being of children and to ensure a strong *and* equal partnership between early childhood services and schools, focusing on the strengths of each.¹³ Such efforts can start small, and should be guided by consultation and partnership. Together with parents, early childhood and school administrations have it in their power to ensure that transition becomes a positive and exciting experience for young children. Policymakers are responsible for ensuring that the upstream strategies adopted facilitate constructive partnership at the practice level and do not entail formalisation of ECCE. Over-emphasis of cognitive skills development in the early years would be developmentally inappropriate and counterproductive in nurturing motivated and competent learners.

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⁹ Woodhead & Moss (eds), 2007. Early Childhood and Primary Education.

¹⁰ Arnold, et al, 2006, for UNESCO GMR, 2006; Landers & Myers, *ibid*.

¹¹ Shaeffer, 2006. Formalise the informal or informalise the formal.

¹² Play, active and experiential learning, sustained shared thinking, personal investigation, use of outdoor as pedagogical tool, etc.

¹³ OECD, 2001 and 2006. *ibid*.