

“Encourage Private Sector”: Pre-school Education Reform in Morocco

In 2000, Morocco passed a new law called, The Basic Status of Pre-School Education, and detached pre-school education for 4 and 5 years olds from the General Private Education Law. One of the highlights of the new law is that the government will leave the provision of pre-school education in the hands of private sector, and it will focus its attention on regulations, training and pedagogical innovations. The market approach, which is to be accompanied by an incentive system, raises a few issues. Among others, the question of inequity figures prominently. To learn more about the possible pitfalls of the otherwise strategic approach, an interview was arranged with Mr. El Hassan El Yazidi, Chief of the Division of the Promotion of Private Education in the Ministry of National Education of Morocco (MOE). The interview was conducted by Ms. Soo-Hyang Choi, UNESCO, Paris, who compiled the following excerpts.

Choi: First, could you briefly tell us about the pre-school education system in Morocco?

El Yazidi: Pre-school education concerns 4 and 5 year olds and is under the auspices of MOE. Services for children under 4 do exist, but are the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Youth. Pre-schools are nearly 100% private.¹ The gross enrolment rate in 2000 was 53%. About 80% of the enrolments are in Koranic pre-schools attended by middle class children and the other 20% are equally divided between Traditional Koranic² pre-schools or Massaid catering for poor children in remote areas, and Modern pre-schools for upper middle-class children in urban areas.

C: Why was a separate law for pre-school education considered necessary?

E: The 1963 General Education Law guaranteed compulsory free public education for children ages 6 to 15, based on the constitution. Pre-school education was not part of this, nor was it mentioned in the constitution. The 1986 General Private Education Law, which concerned the private provision of education services including pre-school education, provided a regulatory framework for pre-school education, but did not stipulate the locus of responsibility for its provision. This was identified as a problem in the national education reform begun in 1999, which led to the preparation of a separate law for pre-school education.

C: So, what has been clarified is that provision of pre-school education is the responsibility of the private sector and the government has the responsibility to support this private provision with an incentive system.

E: That is correct. Although responsibility for provision was placed outside of government, the context made clear that the promulgation of the new law was an important sign of the government's recognition of pre-school education as a distinctive level of education.

C: Could you tell us about the incentive system mentioned in the new law?

E: The new law stipulates that the government should establish an incentive system to encourage private agencies (e.g., families, communities, NGOs, enterprises and for-profit service providers) to open pre-schools. It did not specify the types of incentives, which could be tax benefits, subsidies or other forms of support. The government is consulting stakeholders to develop the idea. The target services are Koranic and Modern pre-schools.

C: Was an incentive system really necessary when provision had already been in the hands of the private agencies?

E: The government intended to accelerate the expansion of pre-school education and a measure was necessary to motivate private agencies to expand the service market.

C: In addition to encouraging the formation and expansion of the market, does the government regulate it?

E: Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that all providers must meet certain conditions to set up and operate their services³ and are subject to government supervision and monitoring.⁴ They are also required to implement the national pre-school curriculum. But all private services charge fees and are free to set their own fee structures. There are no regulations about ceilings for fee. In this sense, the market is not regulated.

C: Fee-charging services cater for parents who can afford fees, and are unlikely to spring up in poor areas. As a result the market may expand, but inequitably. This can be a concern in Morocco, where the inequality measure is already high (11.7%, compared with 8.0% in Egypt, 9.1% in Jordan)⁵ and 63% of pre-school enrolments are in urban

¹ Some public primary schools have pre-school services, but their number is negligible.

² Traditional Koranic pre-schools focus mainly on religious teachings and are generally in poor condition. Koranic pre-schools also provide religious teaching, but they incorporate other subjects including language and maths. Physical and pedagogical conditions are better in Koranic pre-schools.

³ The infrastructure, health, safety and personnel qualification standards have been reinforced under the law.

⁴ All pre-schools are required to provide the Ministry regularly with data related to their services.

⁵ Richest 10% to poorest 10% in share of income or consumption. Source: Human Development Report, 2003.

areas. Does the government have any measures for making access more equitable?

E: No particular measures have been devised yet, as the MOE's main concern at the moment is to increase the overall volume of services. But the issue has been brought to the government's attention, and I trust it will be dealt with in one way or another in the implementation of the incentive system.

C: Inequitable access could be a downside of the market approach, but one of its upsides is cost-effective management of quality. In principle, to survive in the market, services must assure good quality at a competitive price. But this principle will work only if parents are capable of discerning and reinforcing quality services by purchasing them. Are Moroccan parents capable of "disciplining" the market?

E: This is one of the problems. Parents do not yet have a clear understanding of what pre-school education is for, let alone what good quality pre-school education should be like. So they may even judge quality on the basis of the price of the service, and assume that an expensive service must be a good one.

C: Yes, this can happen. In 2000, Morocco's female adult literacy rate stood at 36.1%, lower than the overall figure for the Arab region of 47.8% and 66.1% for developing countries in general. With the illiteracy problem being still prominent, mothers can have difficulty obtaining information on different services and interpreting it sensibly to favour a quality service. Even for this particular market failure, government intervention will be necessary.

E: Yes, but the current position of the government is that it will not intervene in the operation of the market.

C: Besides the incentive system, what other government responsibilities are stipulated by the new law?

E: Training of pre-school teachers has been identified as the area of government responsibility⁶ and the MOE has already embarked on a major national training programme.⁷

C: Training requires resources, and so does the incentive system. It seems the new law actually requires a significant increase in government investment in pre-school education.

E: Yes. That reflects the importance the government attaches to pre-school education. But it is important to note that this importance is to be expressed not through setting up public pre-schools, but through encouraging private services and supporting teacher training.

C: Speaking of teachers, is there a framework for their salaries?

E: No, individual services are to set their own salary levels.

C: As the market of services expands, teachers will move to better-paying services where the opportunities arise. This may pose two problems. First, low-price services catering for disadvantaged children may have difficulty recruiting good, qualified teachers. Second, as your training policy is non-discriminative – all pre-school teachers are entitled to free in-service training – some of the teachers trained with government money could be working in services catering for rich children.

E: We are aware of this possibility, but we have not yet devised measures to address it.

C: Finally, your concept of pre-school education concerns 4 and 5 year olds only. How would you reconcile it with the EFA vision of *learning begins at birth*?

E: In our society, children under age four are not viewed as a target for organised educational activity. So the MOE is not involved. For younger children, family should be the major caretaker.

Postscript: The new law is a clear sign of government support for pre-school education, and the policy of leaving provision to the private sector can be a good strategy, considering that services can be delivered more effectively by actors close to the families and communities. However, complementary targeted measures of the government are needed to ensure poor children's access to quality services and to help parents, the ultimate regulators of the market, to demand quality services. Most importantly, the concept of pre-school education should be broadened to put more emphasis on the child's holistic development, which will necessitate at ground level stronger linkages between home, early childhood services and school education and in the government between education and non-education sectors.

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⁶ The Ministry has never before been responsible for training pre-school teachers. This is a new responsibility.

⁷ To date, 24 trainers have been trained at the national level who will in turn train 96 trainers at the regional level. The training programme will continue so as to provide all pre-school teachers with a free in-service training programme (34 days per year). Pre-school teachers must have completed 12 years of schooling. Primary school teachers are required to have at least two additional years of tertiary education.

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