

Strategies for Reaching the EFA Goal on ECCE

The Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008 highlighted two challenges that remain to be addressed in achieving the Education for All (EFA) goal on early childhood care and education (ECCE)¹: the lack of comprehensive ECCE programmes for children under three, and the uneven provision of pre-primary education for children over three.

What policy strategies could realistically help countries to meet these challenges and speed their progress in early childhood? Is new thinking required on the part of government officials and policy makers to confront these two lingering issues in early childhood? These are the questions explored in this note. But first let us examine the two challenges in more detail.

Lack of ECCE for children under three

The 2008 EFA Global Monitoring Report (hereafter, the Report) stated that only 53% of the world's countries have ECCE programmes for children under three. These are mostly in North America and Western Europe, Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab States are among the regions that are lagging behind.

The development of childcare services² varies from region to region. In developed countries, expansion of these services is closely related to rising female employment rates. Childcare services increase when the economy expands to require an influx of women into the labour market. In Central Asia, the concept of pre-school education has long included services for children under three, who are cared for and educated in an institutional setting from the very beginning of their lives. In Latin America and the Caribbean governments that espouse widespread social welfare programmes for poor families have contributed in part to the proliferation of various childcare services in the region.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, on the other hand, mothers work mainly in the informal sector, which makes it difficult to translate their needs for childcare services into a demand. In the Arab States, where female participation in the

labour market is only 29%, compared with 52% in developing countries, most mothers stay at home, so the demand for childcare services is minimal. In addition, a cultural propensity to keep children at home until the start of formal schooling³ discourages families from seeking institutionalised services for young children. Although the contexts differ, both in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the Arab States, perceived demand is relatively low for childcare services for young children under three.

Inequity in pre-primary education

Unlike childcare services, which have long been associated with lower-income groups and social welfare programmes, pre-primary education has been viewed around the world as a privilege available only to families who can afford it. The exclusiveness of pre-primary education is more pronounced in some countries than in others. The prevalence of private provision is one factor. When private provision spreads, so do disparities. A case in point is Vietnam⁴, where enrolment in private pre-primary education institutions rose from 49% in 1999 to 60% in 2004. During this period, the gap in enrolment between cities and rural areas in Vietnam was more than 35% (1999-2003) in favour of cities.

A more overriding cause of disparities is the lack of public services or public support. In Vietnam, private provision surged, and the urban-rural gap widened, with a government policy to transform semi-public services in urban areas into private services. In Moldova, where private enrolment accounts for less than 1% of the total, the regional disparity still rose sharply with the collapse of the public pre-primary education system. Regional disparities that were widespread in Central Asia and the CIS countries in the 1990s were attributed solely to the collapse of public pre-primary education systems. When available, government investment can remedy the problem, but disparities necessarily arise when government support and investment are withdrawn.

What can be done?

Major government support for childcare services is unlikely in a developing country where perceived demand is low or has not reached a critical level. In those countries, it will be some time before advocacy efforts for national

¹ The EFA first goal for early childhood is "expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children."

² ECCE for children under three is more broadly defined than institutionalised childcare services, but since the latter is the most common form of delivering the former, the two terms are used interchangeably in this note.

³ Corroboratively, the starting age for pre-primary education in most Arab States is four, whereas in all other regions it is three.

⁴ According to the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, the country has one of the highest regional disparity rates.

financing, coordination and supervision of ECCE programmes for very young children, recommended by the Report, can bear fruit.

Focus on health

In Sub-Saharan Africa, one viable ECCE strategy for very young children would be to concentrate on health issues instead of the concept of childcare services which is yet to take root in the region.

Prioritising health has clear advantages. Unlike ECCE, the health sector is well established in most governments, a boon for attracting attention and investment. In terms of programming, when combined with parent education, a health system can effectively promote very young children's holistic development. After all, in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the under-5 mortality rate is 163%⁵ (2005-2010), as opposed to the world average of 78%, the ECCE issue for very young children is basically one of survival. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals on child mortality and maternal health will be among the most effective way of bringing progress to ECCE for children under three in the region.

Focus on parenting education

In the Arab States, the issue of child survival⁶ is not as salient as in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁷ Also, although the region's ECCE for children under three is among the least developed, and its gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education is only half (17%) that of developing countries (34%), the region's net enrolment ratio in primary education (79%) is close to that of developed countries (81%), with an equivalent dropout rate in Grade 1 of 0.9%, far lower than the 5.2% of developing countries.

The region has achieved one of the principal objectives of ECCE -- giving children a strong start, at least in terms of access, for their formal schooling -- apparently without expanded institutional set-ups for ECCE. If parents can do the ECCE job at home, they should be properly guided and supported so as to provide the necessary care and education for children. For the region, parenting education can be an effective ECCE strategy for very young children.

"Piggy-backing" on primary education

The outlook for much-needed increases in public investment in pre-primary education is not promising in developing countries, though the effort deserves continuing efforts. Worldwide, primary and secondary education account for the bulk of education expenditure (70%). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the percentage is 77%. With universal primary education still an elusive goal in many developing countries, investment priorities are unlikely to change. External aid cannot be expected to fill

the gap. Existing foreign investment in ECCE is minuscule, and even that, according to the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, tends to go to middle-income countries rather than to low-income countries where disparities are more pronounced.

An alternative strategy for pre-primary education is to reserve government resources exclusively for the poor while encouraging non-public services for wealthier children. In such contexts, ECCE could "piggy-back" on primary education, using primary school premises and/or primary school teachers. If all pre-primary age groups cannot be accommodated, early education can start with the oldest children, aged 5 or 6. If full-time enrolment is difficult, short crash courses can still help. This was the case in Kazakhstan⁸, for example, especially for children from poor families, whose early exposure to any organised learning environment is often non-existent.

Critics of delivering pre-primary education within the framework of primary education warn of "schoolification" of ECCE as a major risk. But the option has clear financial advantages that many developing countries cannot afford to ignore. It saves set-up, training⁹ and operational costs while enabling governments with few resources to provide at least some early educational experiences to poor children, or some minimum opportunity for poor children to experience an organised learning environment before they start schooling. This is still a help.

Conclusion

If survival is a prominent issue, let's give attention to health interventions and build an approach for child's holistic development around them. If parents are available, let's consider them too as viable early childhood agents. Where government investment is scarce, let financial viability come forth along with pedagogical desirability. Idealism is necessary to make further improvement. But progress needs a beginning, one that realism can engender.

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⁵ Per 1000 births.

⁶ Under-5 mortality being 55%, compared with 78% for the world and 86% for developing countries.

⁷ Except in countries such as Djibouti, Iraq, Mauritania, Sudan and Yemen that have suffered conflicts or disasters.

⁸ Policy Review Report: Early Childhood Care and Education in Kazakhstan. UNESCO Early Childhood and Family Policy Series, No. 12-2005.

⁹ Though primary school teachers need training on ECCE, the option is less costly than to hire and train ECCE teachers.

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