

## Role of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ensuring Equal Opportunity

### Background

In both industrialized and developing nations, preschool education programs have been shown to bring critical gains to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Moreover, studies following children during their years in early education programs and subsequently in school have documented that children who have received quality care and early educational opportunities perform substantially better academically, whether they are being raised in Latin America, Africa, Asia, North America, or Europe. Because of the resulting life benefits early childhood education brings, it is critical – if we are to ensure that all children have equal opportunities – that there be equal access to quality early childhood care and education (ECCE). This policy brief examines the current state of access to early childhood care and education.

### Current Disparities across Social Classes in Formal Care

We have conducted in-depth studies in towns and cities in Mexico, Botswana, and Vietnam, and also analyzed national data from Brazil and Vietnam. Findings from these studies follow below.

The national figures demonstrate, across a wide array of family types, that children who are in families where parental education is lower are less likely to be able to receive early childhood education between the ages of three and five (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Percentage of 3 - 5 year old children enrolled for early childhood education, by household type and parental education.

	Brazil		Vietnam	
	Highest education achieved by working adults in household		Highest education achieved by working adults in household	
	Middle school or less	Secondary school or more	Middle school or less	Secondary school or more
Single working parent	34.1	60.1	34.3	SS*
Two working parents	31.8	60.5	36.0	57.6
Two parents, one or none working	27.7	74.5	35.1	61.5
Extended family all resident adults working	27.0	40.2	30.7	64.8
Extended family not all resident adults working	21.7	55.5	33.3	50.9

During the in-depth studies, we interviewed a representative sample of families attending health centers for routine care and prevention in selected cities and

\* Sample size too small to estimate

towns. The findings from these interviews reveal disparities across social classes in access to formal childcare for children under the age of six that were similar to those found in the national data.

Two important implications were apparent. First, the differences in access to ECCE left children from lower socioeconomic families disadvantaged beginning at a very early age. Second, and equally important, countries' policies can make a difference both in terms of the total number of families having access to ECCE and in terms of decreasing the disparity of access across social classes.

In Botswana, 19 percent of parents with a middle school education or less had the chance to send their children to formal childcare or early education. In contrast, 35 percent of parents with secondary school or university education were able to do so.

While such disparities were also noticeable in Mexico, the Mexican social security system mandates social insurance for formal-sector employment. This coverage includes: onsite-risk insurance, sickness and maternity leave, disability insurance, retirement, and daycare for children between the ages of 6 weeks and 4 years old. The daycare services are provided for mothers and widowed or divorced fathers who have custody of their children.<sup>iii</sup> As a result, while only 20 percent of parents with a middle school education or less had their children in formal childcare or early education, 52 percent of parents who had high school education or more (and who, consequently, were more likely to have obtained a job in the formal sector) had their children in formal ECCE.

In Vietnam, active public sector efforts also increased the number of families being served and decreased the disparities. In Vietnam, a 1999 law organized responsibility for preschool programs within the Ministry of Education and Training. The greatest headway has been made in access to ECCE for 3 – 5 year olds in urban areas.<sup>iii</sup> For Vietnam, the comparable figures were 53 percent versus 63 percent.

When income is used to measure social class, parallel disparities among social classes are, again, apparent. We examined the experience of lower-income workers who earned less than the equivalent of \$10 per day. Wages were adjusted across countries not only for currency exchange rates but also for purchasing power parity using figures from the World Bank.

In Botswana, only 10 percent of lower-income families had access to formal childcare centers or early education.

This percentage was significantly smaller than the 35 percent of higher-income families who had access to formal childcare or early education settings.

In Mexico, where social security increased the overall number of families with access to formal childcare, social class differences still remained marked. Only 22 percent of the low-income families we interviewed in Mexico City and Chiapas were able to send their children to formal childcare centers compared to 58 percent of higher-income families.

Of the countries we studied, Vietnam had more families overall with access to formal childcare, and the differences across income groups were smallest due to the availability of public services. Fifty-seven percent of lower-income families in Ho Chi Minh were able to send a child to formal childcare, as were 62 percent of higher-income families.

#### *Disparities in Informal Care by Paid Adults*

The potential for inequalities in access to care is not confined to formal childcare and early education. We found critical social class differences when it comes to access to informal care provided by paid adults both in the home and outside. In Mexico, 19 percent of the lower-income families we interviewed had paid adults assisting them with informal childcare compared to 53 percent of higher-income parents. (Some higher-income parents had access to both informal care by paid adults and formal childcare by centers). In Botswana, 24 percent of lower-income families were able to pay adults to provide informal care for their children compared to 62 percent of higher-income parents. In Vietnam, the figures were 22 percent versus 27 percent, with a lower percentage overall (in comparison to other countries) using informal care because formal care is relatively accessible. Parallel disparities arise when social class is measured by parents' level of education. Those parents who, themselves, receive the least educational opportunities are the least able to afford to pay adults for informal childcare.

As a result of the sparse availability of affordable formal care and families' difficulty in affording paid informal care provided by adults, parents who had lower incomes and less education were the most likely to have to leave their children in the care of other children or bring their children to work in what were frequently unsafe settings. In Botswana, 33 percent of lower-income parents and 25 percent of parents with only a middle school education or less had to leave their children in the care of other unpaid children. In Vietnam, 17 percent of lower-income parents and 17 percent of parents with only a middle school education or less relied on informal care provided by an unpaid child. In Mexico, 21 percent of parents with only a middle school education or less relied on an unpaid child to provide informal care, and 53 percent had to take their child to work regularly.

#### *Importance of a Public Role for Ensuring Equal Opportunity*

Currently, children living in poverty have a substantially lower chance of receiving early education, formal childcare or even informal care provided by any paid adult (as opposed to by a child). The disparity in the percentages of children attending formal care and in having adult childcare providers are due to differential access to and different ability to afford decent early childhood care and education.

These current disparities have costly consequences for children's health, development and education. A range of methods can be used to increase access to early care and education for the world's children. Partnerships with and mandates on the private sector through social security systems provide one example of an effective way to increase access when parents work in the formal labor force. Similarly, direct public provision and public subsidies of childcare can increase access for children whose parents work in the informal as well as the formal sector (since the informal sector is not effectively covered by labor laws and mandated social security systems). Whatever mechanisms are chosen, public support for early childhood education and care—both from country policy makers and global ones—is urgently needed to decrease inequities.

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<sup>i</sup>*Evaluation of the Reforms: The Americas Social Security Report 2003.* Inter-American Conference on Social Security. Mexico, October 2003, pp 150 - 159.

<sup>ii</sup> For Further information, see: <http://natlex.ilo.org/> where the full text of the Mexican Social Security law can be readily accessed.

<sup>iii</sup> For further information, see:

<http://www.unescobkk.org/education/ece/policies/vietnam.htm>