

Planning for Access: Develop a Data System First

Ask officials at the education ministry of a developing country how they plan to improve access to early childhood services. They will most likely point to efforts to boost enrolment rates in pre-primary education¹ for children over three, and create more kindergartens, pre-schools and the like.

True, many education ministries are aware of the difficulties of reaching even the older children through the formal system and are exploring non-formal alternatives.² They are also developing plans for younger children under three. Nevertheless, most early childhood policy regarding access concentrates, at least in terms of investment priorities, on expanding pre-primary education for children over three.³

In some countries, the mandate of the education ministry for Early Childhood⁴ is still limited to pre-primary education. In this case, the adherence to pre-primary education would be a matter of principle. In others, where the mandate has been expanded to embrace other age groups and non-formal programmes, the policy would be a reflection of the ministry's conscious prioritisation of investment made in favour of pre-primary education.

Both cases point to political unwillingness as one of the causes of the policy direction. However, the experience of the Brazilian Ministry of Education suggest that the problem may reside not so much in a lack of willingness to develop a more comprehensive policy, but, among others, in the education ministries' limited data⁵ system to expand the purview of Early Childhood beyond pre-primary education.

In 1996, the ministerial auspices for Day Care Centres (for children 0-3) and Pre-schools (for children 4-6) in Brazil were integrated under the Ministry of Education.⁶ One of

the first steps in implementing this broader mandate was to collect data on these services. In 1997, the Ministry's annual school census included data on a few Day Care Centres linked to schools. In 2000, the Ministry conducted a nationwide survey to collect baseline data on early childhood education, the first of its kind by the Ministry. Significantly, the survey covered not only Pre-schools, but also Day Care Centres serving children under three.

The data on Day Care Centres were incomplete, because the survey could not map all centres across the country. Nevertheless, the partial baseline data helped the Ministry embrace the entire 0-6 age groups and services catering for them within the purview of its policy planning. The Ministry acknowledged that the data played an important role in this process.

Most important, before carrying out the survey, the Ministry revised legal guidelines for early childhood institutions, which helped register and accredit Day Care Centres as well as other services that had been outside the orbit of government administration. Thanks to this exercise, Day Care Centres could be surveyed and eventually included in the Ministry's national policy purview of Early Childhood.

The Brazilian experience may not be unique, but it illustrates two important points.

First, the Ministry sought to develop a comprehensive data set covering the 0-6 age group before embarking on policy development. Notably, it was among the first tasks it undertook upon being given its expanded mandate.⁷ Second, it paid attention to the system development for identifying and recognising the Day Care Centres before proceeding to collect data on them.

This policy prioritisation is noteworthy because more often than not, early childhood policies are developed without

¹ In this note, pre-primary education is defined as a school- or centre-based educational programme for children over three (or two, in some cases), following the definition of the International Standard Classification of Education on pre-primary education or ISCED-0.

² For instance, in Cuba, the Ministry of Education has an integrated system for children of 0-6 years of age, which includes community-based organised parental education programmes for children under three.

³ The access problem for children under three is also raised in developed countries, with important exceptions of some Nordic countries which have extended entitlement to places for children under three years.

⁴ Early Childhood is capitalised to distinguish it as a profession and discipline as regard to early childhood as the early period in one's life cycle.

⁵ Including both quantitative and qualitative data.

⁶ In fact, in 1988 the Federal Constitution declared that early childhood education is a right of every child and its provision the duty of the State

and family, and mentioned both Day Care Centres, which were under the Ministry of Social Affairs, and Pre-schools within the purview of the Education Chapter. But it was only with the introduction of the Guidelines for National Education (Law 9394), or *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional – LDB* in 1996 that the Ministry of Education became the responsible authority for both services. Importantly, the provision responsibility for early childhood services is with the municipalities.

⁷ Even before the Survey, which was conducted in 2000, the Ministry carried out some initiatives for Day Care Centres. For example, it had developed curriculum, accreditation, operation and training guidelines for early childhood services including Day Care Centres. But no significant policy planning for access or financing for Day Care Centres had been launched before the Survey.

the support of sound data. This is not to say that the needs for early childhood services cannot be grasped without data. In some countries, they are too obvious to ignore even if there are little data that can attest to them. But being aware that there are needs to be addressed is one thing, and addressing those needs through concrete actions is another. The latter requires political awareness followed by specific policy discourse, planning and financial commitment, for which obtaining such an essential policy tool as data is essential.

While policy makers may accord equal importance to data and policy development, they may underestimate the importance of the former as a pre-requisite for the latter. Likewise, concerning data development in Early Childhood, the focus is typically on the reliability or validity of data or on the development of indicators, with insufficient attention paid to developing a system through which the target services, including those at the grassroots level, can be identified, recognised and supported administratively. In the case of Brazil, the value of data as a tool and the need for improving the basic system infrastructure for data collection, such as registration of services, were well recognised.

Whether or not such improved data system will eventually lead to a comprehensive policy plan on access in the case of Brazil remains to be seen. The question hinges upon, in general, many other factors such as the availability of sufficient resources. For instance, in order to encourage unofficial services to register, some incentive (e.g., tax relief, support, training opportunities, and recognition) may have to be found. To promote an integrated approach to Early Childhood, ministries would also need to develop equally integrated systems for funding, curriculum, training and provision of services. In fact, UNESCO's recent studies⁸ show that what is critical, yet difficult to achieve, in establishing an integrated early childhood system is to develop an integrated curriculum and a training system for all types of educators. Most importantly, an integrated system would not be established without necessary co-ordination with other ministries.

But in the case of Brazil, the approach seems to have worked to the extent that the Ministry sought to embrace Early Childhood beyond pre-primary education and brought the services and age groups that were not under its responsibility to the policy discourse of Early Childhood. And this task of bringing the reality that needs policy attention to the arena of public discourse at all is the first, and perhaps one of the most important, steps towards an integrated system of Early Childhood.

⁸ Podmore, V., & Meade, A. (April). Early childhood education policy co-ordination under the auspices of the Department/ Ministry of Education: A case study of New Zealand. *UNESCO Early Childhood and Family Policy Series, Number 1.* / Taguchi, H., & Munkhammar, I. (Forthcoming). An integrated early childhood policy system: The case study of Sweden. *UNESCO Early Childhood and Family Policy Series, Number 2.* / Rayna, S. (Forthcoming) La mise en oeuvre de la politique intégrée de la petite enfance au Sénégal. *UNESCO Early Childhood and Family Policy Series, Number 5.*

Governments, professionals and development agencies have all tried to address the problems of the education ministries' policy for Early Childhood,⁹ seeking better ways to expend the limited public resources available for the area. Brain research has been cited for the importance of young children's access to care and education from their earliest years of life. Reference has also been made to the global Education for All campaigns and related declarations to revise the formalist view of Early Childhood. Though these advocacy efforts have not been futile, they have not generally succeeded in altering the policy direction. One of the reasons could have been the inadequate preparation of the very first step: Developing an integrated, comprehensive data system for Early Childhood.

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⁹ It has been criticised that the policy does not pay attention to children under three and children in disadvantaged circumstances. Also criticised are the policy's neglect of the care aspects of child development (e.g., health and nutrition) and parent education, which should be an integral part of early childhood policy and a strategic means of expanding access to quality early childhood environments at home. It must also be noted that the policy also focuses on the availability of services, but availability is only one aspect of access. The new services should also be accessible – within the practical reach of the target children and their parents, and more importantly, affordable. There should also be services for children with special needs and for all age groups.