



## Pre-Primary Education: A Valid Investment Option for EFA

The Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) asserted that “learning begins at birth.” What should this mean to countries that are seeking to develop and expand early childhood services? Should all countries start from birth? Should the EFA plans for early childhood give priority to younger children over older children?

Despite the Declaration that learning begins at birth, most EFA plans for early childhood, especially those from developing countries, emphasise pre-primary education for children from the age of three up to the age of their entry into primary school.<sup>1</sup> Even in the Latin American and Caribbean region, where the entire early childhood age group<sup>2</sup> increasingly falls under the auspices of the education sector, the priority remains on universal pre-primary education.

How can this policy direction be reconciled with the EFA vision that learning begins at birth? Should the focus on pre-primary education be discouraged because it does not give attention to younger children? Or should it be encouraged as a concrete goal for the education sector, the lead sector for EFA, to pursue? Or should the decision on which age group to prioritise be left to each individual country, with neither position being promoted at the global level?

While there should definitely be room for variations among countries, some suggestions at the global level regarding the age group to target and prioritise, especially by the education sector, would be useful given that the issue is a policy dilemma facing many countries. This note discusses the rationales and preconditions of the argument surrounding education sector’s prioritisation of pre-primary education.

### *Intrinsic commitment*

In many developing countries, early childhood is not a priority of the education sector. This is particularly the case where the sector is already burdened with responsibilities for other levels of education. Nevertheless, whenever the sector can spare attention for early childhood, it usually goes to pre-primary education. Even when nothing else is possible, the provision of some form

of pre-primary education is what the sector strives to maintain.

For example, the CEE/CIS countries,<sup>3</sup> when faced with the collapse of preschool education during the transition period, opted to focus on children entering primary school and provide them with some minimum pre-primary education, while preschool education for the other age groups was placed on hold. In Pakistan, when the education sector returned to early childhood in the early 1990s after a long hiatus, its attention went mainly to *katchi*, or pre-primary classes.

Some view these developments with concern, fearing that they reduce the discipline of early childhood to simply preparing children for formal schooling. There is also the concern that the multi-sectorality of early childhood is minimised when the educational component is highlighted. Such dangers do exist, meriting serious consideration. Nonetheless, pre-primary education is the bastion of the education sector’s commitment to early childhood and its natural entry point to early childhood.

### *Realism*

Expansion of early childhood services, even in developed countries, rarely progresses upward from the earliest years. Universal provision starts with the last year of early childhood and moves downward,<sup>4</sup> not the other way around. Expecting countries with limited resources and understanding about early childhood to reverse the course of development – starting with investment in the earliest years – imposes a daunting challenge.

Also, the provision options available for the education sector to support early childhood tend to favour pre-primary education. For example, creating a pre-primary class within an existing primary school is within the sector’s capacity, whereas creating a new independent service structure is a serious burden. Likewise, training primary school teachers on early childhood development and tasking them to look after the pre-primary age group is a less daunting challenge than recruiting a new workforce for early childhood that caters for all age groups. These financially viable options for pre-primary education deserve special attention, if not for the sole reason of feasibility.

<sup>1</sup> In this note, pre-primary education is defined as ISCED-0, educational early childhood services and programmes attended by children from the age of three up to the age of entry into primary school. Pre-primary courses, classes or programmes often concern only part, not all, of the ISCED-0 period, but in this note they are referred to as part of pre-primary education.

<sup>2</sup> 0 - 5, 6, or 7, depending on the country.

<sup>3</sup> Central and Eastern European countries and the Commonwealth of Independent States of the former Soviet Union.

<sup>4</sup> The 2002 Barcelona Targets for E.U. countries aim for 90% enrolment of 3-6-year-olds in pre-primary education by 2010 and 33% for under-3-year-olds in early childhood services.

**Precondition I: Child's holistic development**

Advocacy for pre-primary education, however, must insist on one important precondition, namely that pre-primary education should not result in early schooling. The focus of pre-primary education should be on helping children to build the psychosocial foundations needed for them to undertake abstract learning later in primary school. The emphasis should not be on teaching them specific reading and arithmetic skills that require abstraction.

Pre-primary education, no matter how brief it lasts, must promote the child's holistic development. The emphasis should be on a well-balanced development. Health, nutrition, a safe and clean environment, and outreach to parents and communities should not be of any less importance for the education and care of pre-primary age children. Pre-primary education can be prioritised, but there should be no compromise on the ultimate purpose of any early childhood services – the child's holistic development.

**Precondition II: Appropriate pedagogy**

Allying with primary education, its infrastructure and human resources can be, as mentioned above, a viable strategy for expanding access for early childhood. But early childhood is a discipline that requires its own specific pedagogy. When the area is bordered with primary education, the tendency to "schoolify" is inevitably strong. Thus, some minimum care to make pre-primary classes an early childhood-friendly environment, both pedagogically and physically, is imperative.

In order to encourage children's play as well as learning, the pre-primary class, if set up in a primary school setting, should accommodate some open space to encourage children's free movement and playful activities other than academic learning. The teachers, if they are primary school teachers, should be trained so that they do not insist on rote learning for young children. If they cannot be trained and re-educated to become full-fledged early childhood specialists, then they should at least be informed of how not to be primary school teachers vis-à-vis young children who are not yet students.

**Precondition III: Plans for ages 0-3**

Priority given to pre-primary education for children over three can translate into less attention to services for younger children. This is of particular concern for countries where the working mothers' childcare needs are growing and where survival issues of young children are pronounced.

One useful planning strategy to resolve this dilemma is phasing. If the responsibility for entire early childhood age groups rests with the education sector and the sector cannot support all age groups at once, then the sector may prioritise pre-primary education for older children. Nonetheless, there must still be a plan to phase in services for the younger age groups over time. Presence of a phased plan can impels the sector, foremost, not to forget about the younger age groups, while eventually responding to

their needs as part of the sector's comprehensive commitment to early childhood.

Partnership is another important strategy for meeting the care and education needs of all early childhood age groups. This is particularly the case if the administrative responsibility for early childhood is spread over different sectors. For instance, the social and health sectors are often more closely interfaced with families. This makes them more efficient in delivering and managing parenting, health, and nutrition services, which are the needs that are particularly pronounced among younger children.

Even within the education sector, the non-formal sub-sector has many useful programmes, such as female literacy classes or community learning programmes, where a parenting component can easily be inserted to improve young children's home environment. This is a very effective way of catering for the care and education needs of young children. Through division of work and partnership, the care and education of younger children can be addressed concurrently with that for older children.

**Conclusion**

Learning begins at birth, but the policy options for addressing this principle need to be developed in relation to reality. For the education sector, pre-primary education is a natural entry point to early childhood provision. Pre-primary education deserves prioritisation on the condition that it promotes the child's holistic development, that it is delivered in an environment meeting some minimum pedagogical standards, and that there is a phased plan for the inclusion of younger age groups. So long as these preconditions are met, pre-primary education is the most realistic way for the education sector to approach the EFA declaration that *learning begins at birth*.

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