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Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007
Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education

Is everybody ready? Readiness, transition and continuity: lessons, reflections and moving forward

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Is Everybody Ready?

Readiness, Transition and Continuity: Reflections and Moving Forward

PART I

INTRODUCTION

Mohamed, age 8, idly draws patterns in the earth with a twig. Every so often he glances up to do a quick check that the sheep haven't wandered too far. Last year he was in school but there were ninety-seven children in his class and he could never see the board. His parents didn't have enough money to buy the textbooks in the market and the ones that were supposed to be supplied free by the Ministry of Education arrived after the school year was three quarters over and in any case they ran out before Mohamed could get one. Mohamed didn't go back to school this year.

Rania helps her mother wash the dishes. She will spend most of the day looking after her brother who, age 4, is just two years younger than she is. Rania was in school last year too. There had been lots on the radio telling all parents they should send their children to school and about school being free. Rania loved going to school but her teacher often had to teach other classes and very often the Grade 1 children were left on their own. Rania failed two of the exams at the end of Grade 1 and the teacher said she would have to repeat the year. Rania wanted to go back but her parents said it was a waste of time.

There are millions of Mohameds and Rantias. With the big push for universal primary education a large number of children enrol in school – more than ever before. But many stay for only a short time and do not complete even a basic education. We are very aware that completion of primary education is a major challenge – hence the emphasis on completion and not just enrolment in the Dakar commitments (2000) and the MDGs. What we have not looked at carefully enough is where efforts to ensure completion are breaking down – i.e. at what point within the primary school children are leaving and why.

Of those enrolled, approximately 88 million children drop-out before they completing primary education. The majority of those who drop-out in fact leave or are pushed out of school within the first year or two. According to the GMR 2005 statistics, twice as many children dropped out in Grade 1 than in any other primary grade. Of those remaining, the highest number of primary drop-outs occurred in Grade 2.

In many countries high drop-out rates combine with even worse repetition rates in the first year of primary school. In many parts of South Asia, Nepal and Pakistan for example, more than half the Grade 1 children either drop-out or repeat. Even in countries where there may be automatic promotion children still become established in persistent patterns of under-achievement and lose enthusiasm for learning.

These problems are not new. In 1991 the OREALC-UNESCO publication noted that in Mexico 31.5% repeated 1st Grade (more than 10 times the percentage in the 6th Grade). The situation is even worse looking at the LA/C situation as a whole where the report found that almost half (42.4%) the children repeating Grade 1. In some countries the repetition problem was removed in recent years through the introduction of automatic promotion. This does not mean that teaching practices have become more responsive to individual needs or that children have received additional help to overcome specific difficulties. It has simply meant that children have been moved up annually, often facing increasing difficulty with each passing year. Not surprisingly then, in many places which have taken this approach, a decrease in repetition has been accompanied by a concomitant increase in drop-out.

In East Africa, for example, the big national pushes for UPE and the abolition of charges has resulted in massive enrolment increases - 1.5 million more students in Kenyan primary schools for example. In a survey of Mombasa schools, enrolment increased by 63% in Standards 1-3 between 2002 and 2003. Grade 1 class sizes in particular have mushroomed to 100 plus children (usually also ranging in ages from 4-12+). The MoE enrolment and completion statistics for Uganda over the years just prior

to and after the introduction of UPE reveal how little completion rates have changed. Grade 1 enrolments have increased massively...but reduce dramatically by Grade 2 and continue to tail off more gradually right through primary with 50% of those who enter eventually completing. About half the students that enter school drop-out or repeat first grade. Drop-out rates in the country have steadily increased in the last four years. Between 2000 and 2002, after UPE had already brought students into the schools, in relative terms, 10 times more students repeated Grade 1 than before UPE. (UNESCO Ed Stats 2005).

Free education has not resolved the issue of access since so many leave - disillusioned with the overcrowding and lack of anywhere to sit, lack of teaching and learning materials, and, of course crucially, a trained and interested teacher.

This article considers how we may be able to tackle issues of drop-out and under-achievement. It looks at the transitions that children make between their early childhood experiences and their schooling, and examines ways in which these transitions can be supported. It asks questions about how we lay the foundations which help ensure that children and young people are equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to help them interact effectively with the world and be contributing members of society. It examines the evidence from early childhood programmes looking at their benefits to children's learning and success in school. And in this context it looks particularly at poverty and exclusion and the ways in which well conceived early childhood programmes can be highly effective in addressing these. Finally, it looks at the connection between EFA's 1st goal and the attainment of other goals (especially primary completion, gender equity and quality).

However, we are not just concerned with what happens to children before they enter school. We also ask and explore the following questions: Why is it that despite the internationally accepted definition of early years as meaning 0-8, early childhood professionals and policy-makers almost always ignore the 6-8 year-olds and think only of ECD as during the pre-school years? What is happening within the large-scale school improvement programmes to ensure a welcoming environment and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for children during those vital early years of formal school? What should we be doing to ensure continuity of good practices and learning? How can we conceptualize and implement work differently so that deliberately linked ECD and early primary components are part of a whole?

EDUCATION FOR ALL (EFA) - GOAL 1

The 1st goal in the World declaration on Education for All (Jomtien, 1990) was the expansion of early childhood care and education programmes. The commitment was re-affirmed and EFA goals updated and re-stated at the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000. The 1st goal emphasized *"Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children"*

Early childhood programmes are important in and of themselves. As de los Angeles Bautista says, early childhood programmes are about "addressing the child's rights now and not for some future time." They are after all in essence concerned with the things which parents around the world want for their children. They are about children growing up healthy, capable, confident and caring, well nourished, safe from harm, and able to get on with other people.

Through the very nature of their concern with ensuring solid foundations for children's overall development, early childhood programmes also have important implications for children's future life chances. The Framework for Action adopted at the Jomtien Conference in 1990 emphasized the critical importance of the early years within the education sphere: "The preconditions for educational quality, equity and efficiency are set in the early childhood years, making attention to early childhood care and development essential to the achievement of basic educational goals."

But have we done enough to really analyze and then act on the connection between attention to EFA's 1st goal and the attainment of other goals? This connection is particularly critical for those goals concerned with:

- Access and Completion of basic education (goal 2)
- Addressing gender issues (goal 5) and
- Improving quality (goal 6).

These are all discussed in the sections below. As in other Global Monitoring Reports we will examine

different goals in relation to the goal which is the focus of this report.

The early years are critical in the formation of intelligence, personality, social behaviour and physical development. We are increasingly aware of the benefits of ECD programmes, not only for the child and the family, but also over time in terms of the child's ability to contribute to society. Investment in the early years offers outstanding returns- both in human and financial terms. Studies from around the world demonstrate that children who participate in early childhood programmes do better in school, are healthier, and do better as adults in terms of being economically productive, emotionally balanced and socially responsible. Our main focus in this article is on the direct links between children's early experiences with subsequent learning and thus success or difficulties in entering, moving through and on from primary and later education levels

TRANSITION

Transition is "the act of passing from one state or place to the next" – "a change from one place or state or subject or stage to another", *WordNet, 2003 Princeton University*.

We are using transition here to describe the period of time before and after a child moves into primary school (either from home or from an early childhood programme) and the passage from one to the other. Starting primary school is a momentous experience for most children. It is often stressful (nothing is familiar, everything is bigger, there are lots of unfamiliar people). Whether it is an exciting or terrifying experience it is a strong memory for most people. We will be looking at how this time can be made into a positive experience through actions we can take both before the child ever goes to school and once s/he is there.

For many working in ECD there has been perhaps a historical wariness of making too much of the connections of ECD to the formal system. There is a fear that ECD programmes can become hijacked by the system and become essentially a downward extension of uninspiring primary schools. There is fear that active learning methods in which children learn by doing, manipulating concrete objects, talking with others, discovering things for themselves in an atmosphere of encouragement and success, might be replaced by an emphasis on rote learning where the child is seen as a passive recipient. Such fears have sometimes been well-founded. For example, we see many preschool centres in countries worldwide using inappropriate methods in a misguided attempt to give their children an academic edge when they enter school. This is done through pushing reading, writing and maths activities for which children are not yet ready rather than laying firm foundations in language, enthusiasm for learning and interaction. However, there are also positive experiences in which the best of early childhood practice influences lower primary. Continuity is key, and articulation between early childhood programmes (where they exist) and primary school education is a growing concern given increasing rates of participation in ECD programmes.

READINESS

Readiness and Transition are closely related. For Transition to be smooth children need to be ready for school. Equally important and only more recently acknowledged is the fact that schools need to be ready for children. Parental "readiness" to be involved and supportive both before and after children move into school is also recognized as key amongst the supports needed for successful transition.

We begin by looking at the child and his/her level of readiness for school. In later sections, we discuss the readiness of schools and systems for children, as well as families and communities involvement in this process.

PART II

CHILDREN AND THEIR 'READINESS'

"Can she copy off the board? Count to 20?"

Earlier definitions of school readiness focused on a set of cognitive skills that a child should possess to be ready to start Grade 1. This traditional construct of school readiness was criticized for its narrow focus (Ramey and Ramey, 1999). While misconceptions in plenty of places continue to distort ideas about school readiness understanding of what "school readiness" means has increased greatly in recent years.

There is consensus, based upon a wealth of research, that a child's readiness for school depends on his/her levels across five distinct but connected domains

- Physical well-being and motor development
- Social and emotional development
- Approaches to learning
- Language development
- Cognition and general knowledge

Most teachers agree. They want children to be healthy, confident, active and attentive, able to communicate their needs, feelings and thoughts, enthusiastic and curious when approaching new activities. They also place importance on skills such as the ability to follow directions, not being disruptive in class, and being sensitive to others (Kids Count, 2005). As Young (2003) says, "The child who is ready for school has a combination of positive characteristics." However, educators and parents often have different definitions of school readiness. Teachers put more emphasis on the social domain whereas many parents emphasise academic readiness. Interestingly this often changes as parents experience the benefits of ECD programmes. Examples abound from programmes serving low-income rural families in different parts of Asia (Pakistan, Nepal, Laos, Myanmar) in which parents who had clearly demanded "school learning" in the beginning are in reality most appreciative of their children's social development. They delight in their children's cleverness but talk most about the fact that they are polite, respectful, obedient and friendly and, at the same time, confident, curious and comfortable even with new people. They appear to combine traits that have traditionally been emphasized for children within the culture with those that are critical for coping with a changing world.

FACTORS AFFECTING CHILD READINESS

A child entering school comes with a multitude of experiences and years of interaction and learning with her/his family and peers. There are a number of factors, both at the level of the child and her/his wider environment, that influence a child's overall development and her/his readiness for school.

International economic and political trends

Globalization, the transition from planned to market economies, the increasing marginalization of social services, migration for work, the increasingly heavy workloads of girls and women, the move toward nuclear families and increasing numbers of one parent households, armed conflicts, and HIV/AIDS affect every aspect of young children's lives.

Poverty

Poverty is one of the most important factors that impedes young children's development all over the world. Whether we are talking about families, communities or countries, a lack of resources undermines the capacity to provide adequately for children and to afford them opportunities. Economic pressures are a fundamental obstacle that families face in raising their children. Family poverty has been shown in a raft of studies to adversely affect children's health, intellectual capabilities, academic achievement and behaviour (Weitzman, 2003). And we know that poverty that occurs during infancy and pre-school years is more damaging than poverty experienced later in childhood (Brooks-Gunn

and Duncan, 1997). Many poor children are denied the opportunity to go to school. Even young children - 5-7 year olds – may be expected to care for younger siblings, watch over livestock, shoo away wild animals from crops/gardens, collect water and firewood. Other children enter school unready to learn. These children do poorly, repeat, and drop-out at high rates. They are at a disadvantage when they enter the labour force, earning little, and when they become parents they pass their poverty on to their children.

However, the assumption that programmes, which focus on socio-economic development, automatically enhance children's overall health and development has been overturned. Increased food production does not automatically translate into better fed children. It has become clear that while efforts for children should be set firmly within the family and community context, a specific focus on the child is needed - otherwise children and their needs tend to get "lost".

Exclusion and Disempowerment

Often little attention has been given to the aspects of poverty that most affect children (e.g., lack of access to basic social services), although these are essential in the fight against poverty UNICEF (2000). There is much critical work being done to better understand the multi-dimensional nature of poverty (and its many non-monetary aspects, including lack of access to education and health programmes, exclusion, social and political disempowerment on the basis of gender, religion, ethnicity etc.). Indeed Poverty Reduction Strategy Plans (PRSPs) avoid a purely economic view of poverty.

Where families live in poverty, fatigue and general frustration often impact negatively. Families bringing up children in poverty are often understandably focused on keeping children fed, physical skills and social responsibility. Adults feel little sense of agency or control, and it is not surprising that the most disadvantaged families feel powerless to promote their children's best interests. Too often they underestimate their ability (through everyday activities and conversations) to support their young children's enthusiasm for learning, language, and sense of self. Yet these are the very capacities that have the greatest significance in enabling children to thrive at school and break the cycle of poverty (Arnold 2004).

Nutrition

The nutritional deficiencies strongly associated with poverty result in poor behavioural development in infants and children. Grantham-McGregor's study of children in Jamaica demonstrated that small-for-gestational age, birth weight, vitamin deficiencies, and malnutrition are associated with long-term deficits in cognition and school achievement. Malnourished children were less engaged in their environments and were less active and had shorter attention spans than their counterparts. In school, they had lower grades and showed less emotional control (Grantham-McGregor, 1995). Damage related to malnutrition is difficult to address after the age of three.

The negative effects of micronutrient malnutrition, especially amongst younger children, has long-term and debilitating effects. Lack of 3 micronutrients – iron, iodine, and vitamin A – have been linked to compromised growth and immune functions, and reduced mental development and educational attainment (Abadzi, 2006). A longitudinal research conducted in Costa Rica found that children who have iron-deficiency anaemia in infancy are at risk for long-lasting developmental disadvantage. Children with chronic iron deficiency in infancy scored lower on measures of overall mental and motor functioning, and most of them had repeated a grade and/or required additional assistance in school.

Protein-energy malnutrition affected girls' cognitive functions disproportionately, including their ability to learn, process and structure information, react appropriately to their surroundings, and identify and solve relevant problems (Davidson et al, 2000). Children born malnourished are found to be sick more often, are susceptible to infections, and are more likely to drop-out of school (Michealowa, 2001). In the Philippines, research found that malnourished children perform poorly on cognitive tests in school, start primary school at a later age (Glewwe et al, 2001).

In sum, health and nutritional status during the early childhood period and at entry to school will affect the ability of children to attend school and learn. Poor health leads to school absences, making it difficult for children to keep pace. A child's health and nutritional status also affects his/her ability to pay attention in school and to capture what is being taught.

Brain development

Learning depends on whether the brain is able to process information. Prolonged and early malnutrition, parasitic diseases, environmental toxins, difficult births, substance abuse, and limited stimulation all affect brain development (Abadzi, 2006). Brain research over the last few decades demonstrates that the brain is almost entirely developed by the time a child enters school. Interactions during the first few years substantially affect the growth of children's neural pathways. Early years experiences have a decisive influence on the architecture of the brain and how its circuitry is « wired » (Shore, 97) - and therefore on the nature and extent of later capacities. New neuroscience findings thus provide additional important evidence demonstrating the influences of the first few years on the rest of a child's life. Mustard (2005) states it clearly: 'The weight of the evidence shows that the quality of the experience an infant, toddler, and young child is exposed to during the preschool phase of development affects learning capacity in the school system as well as behaviour.'

Home environment

Studies have shown that the quality of the home environment affects children's development. This factor is often associated with socio-economic status, with poorer families providing a less stimulating environment for their child, as was seen in Jamaica's Profiles Project (Samms-Vaughan, 2004). However, we need to avoid over-simplistic conclusions about the relationship between poverty and people's capacity to support children's development. Time and again we find practices which draw creatively on minimal resources. Socio-economic factors are a key influence, but the picture is more complex.

Results from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project in the UK have shown that home learning environment can have more of an affect on children's development than socioeconomic status. This large-scale longitudinal study tracked children from age 3 to end of Grade 2. Home learning environment, defined as activities that offer learning opportunities to the child (e.g. reading to children, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, painting and drawing, having friends round to play etc) was more strongly associated with children's intellectual and social development than either parental education or occupation. According to the authors, this finding suggests that poor parents, with few qualifications can improve their children's progress and give them a better start at school, by engaging in activities at home that foster learning. They maintain that "what parents do with their children is more important than who parents are" and recommend the incorporation of parent support and education in all ECD initiatives (Sylva et al, 2004).

In a dramatically different context a child rearing study in Nepal had some similar findings (Arnold et al, 2000). While the effects of poverty (focus on day-to-day survival, heavy workloads, etc) undermined families' capacity to support their children's development, some families managed to overcome these constraints. The study found many examples of "positive deviance" – families from the most disadvantaged groups who provided learning opportunities through the way they engaged with their children during everyday activities and conversations. One mother, for example, on returning home from a long day's work, immediately sat down with her four children. They helped sort the fish she had just caught, while she encouraged them to talk about the characteristics of the fish, their size, colour, which ones they liked best etc and took an interest in their responses. She also brought back with her four tiny crabs with which the children played – crab races etc!

Care and nurture

The importance of a caring and nurturing adult is paramount in the healthy growth and development of a child. Parents (or their substitutes) are the child's first and most important teachers and the greatest influence on his or her development. Nurturing caregiver-child relationships have universal features across cultures, regardless of differences in specific childcare practices. They are characterized by children being well-fed and kept safe, and by consistent affection, responsiveness, conversation, stimulation and opportunities to learn about their world. The 2004 WHO publication – "The Importance of Caregiver-Child Interactions for the Survival and Healthy Development of Young Children" – emphasizes that it is the way caring practices are performed which is critical. They identify sensitivity and responsiveness as the key: sensitivity being an awareness of the infant/young child and his/her

communications, and responsiveness the capacity to respond appropriately to signals and communications. Chronic stress, depression etc. can disrupt the capacity of adults to provide loving care.

A longitudinal study of more than a thousand families from 10 sites around the USA found that sensitive and responsive caregiving, as well as language stimulation, are positively related to early cognitive and language development (NICHD, 2001; Brooks-Gunn, Han, and Waldfogel, 2002). Research also indicates, not surprisingly, that support and warmth from a caregiver results in greater social competence in a child. Children who are given this support have fewer behavioural issues and enhanced thinking and reasoning skills by the time they are school age (Shonkoff, 2000). Strong and supportive caregiving relationship makes children more resilient; protects them from the damaging effects of deprivation, poverty and violence. The caring relationship is the strongest explanation for why some children who grow up in wretched conditioned nonetheless are healthy, able to be productive in school and work, and have good relationships with other people (WHO, 2004). There are many factors that affect caregivers' ability to be sensitive and responsive. These include; socio-economic conditions, social support, knowledge about children's development, caregiver emotional states, caregiver skills and characteristics of the child.

Language

Language is the basic tool for thought, communication, reasoning, and making sense of a rapidly changing world. Language development is closely interrelated with children's emotional and psychosocial development (Cohen, 2005). As such language competence is critical for school readiness. Problems with language and communication can set a child on a maladaptive trajectory throughout life (Moffitt, 1993 in Cohen, 2005).

A stable and close emotional relationship, long before the infant learns to speak, enables the caregiver to describe and mediate the child's experiences, and lays the foundation for the child's language development (WHO, 2004). Children who live in poverty in their early years have significantly less verbal interaction with their parents and so begin school with less vocabulary development than their peers from higher income backgrounds (Pikulski and Templeton, 2004).

Hart and Riseley's study "Meaningful Differences in Everyday Experiences of Young American Children" (2003) is one of the most thorough studies ever conducted. Three groups of children from welfare families, working class families, and professional families were tape-recorded throughout their first years. The differences in the experiences of the three groups are startling. By the age of four, fifty million words will have been addressed to a professional's child, thirty million to a working class child, and just twelve million to a welfare child. At the age of three, the professional's child had a bigger vocabulary than the parent of the welfare child. At three years old the professional's child has had 700,000 encouragements, more than eleven times as many as the 60,000 experienced by the welfare child. The professional's child has had only 80,000 discouragements, whereas the welfare child has experienced 120,000 (double the number of encouragements s/he has received). When the children in the study were measured at ages nine and ten, the authors, with an uncharacteristic slip from their stern academic terminology, conclude: "We were awestruck at how well our measures of accomplishments at 3 predicted language skill at 9 to 10". In other words, school had added little value after the age of three; it was already too late. The study is a good reminder for us all that within every country there is a massive imbalance between rich and poor with impacts on every aspect of children's lives.

Research has shown the importance of literacy experiences in the pre-school years for later school success. Through sharing stories, caregivers can forge close relationships with their children (Im et al, 2004) and learning occurs best in such relationships. Reading to children and the number of books in the home is a predictor of better language development, reading outcome and school success (Whitehurst, 1998). The most extensive evidence is from a large-scale longitudinal study of children in Bristol, England (Wells, 1985). Wells found that the single most important influence on children's success in learning to read in primary school was the extent of their direct experience with print during their preschool years.

THE IMPACT OF ECD PROGRAMMES

Broad ECD programmes aim to ensure the synergy of protection, good health and nutrition, supportive and affectionate interaction, stimulation and opportunities for exploring the environment. The positive influences of ECD resonate throughout society, at the level of the child, family, community and wider society. Moreover, benefits continue throughout the child's life cycle. Investments in the early years have been recognised through numerous studies as bringing high returns. Quite simply children who get a good start do better in school, are healthier, and do better as adults in terms of obtaining a good job, getting on well with other people etc. ECD programmes' value then, is not only in terms of responding to the immediate needs of children and their families, but also over time in terms of children's ability to contribute to the community and participate in society. One of the most compelling arguments for investment in ECD is that failure to do this perpetuates social and economic disparity and waste of social and human potential.

Child Development and Readiness Measures

There are a host of studies and evaluations which demonstrate the gains for children who participate in early childhood programmes. The most persuasive of these allow for comparison between groups of children who have participated in early childhood programmes and similar control groups of children who have not.

ICDS serves more than 23 million children and is the largest ECD programme in the world. A substantial Indian study looked at impacts on children's status in three states (Vazir et al, 1999) using the WHO Developmental Milestones Test. Children were matched within each state by mother's age, education, nutritional status, income, child age. Results showed significant effect of ICDS on mental development in all three states.

Grantham-McGregor's 1991 Jamaica study (Young, 2002) demonstrates that nutritional supplementation combined with stimulation for stunted children from a poor population brought them up to the level of a normal control group within 2 years. In another Jamaican programme (Roving Caregivers) young school leavers are recruited to visit disadvantaged rural homes and support mothers with children under 3 to use play activities and optimal child rearing practices. After one year in the programme, children in the intervention group had significantly higher scores on the Griffiths Mental Development Scales.

A preschool programme in rural Bangladesh was evaluated in terms of cognitive, social, and health outcomes of children. After controlling for differences in child age and nutritional status, mother's education, and assets, preschool children performed better than controls on measures of vocabulary, verbal reasoning, nonverbal reasoning, and school readiness and were less likely to be stunted.

Numerous studies including the massive National Institute of Child Health and Development study in the US (2001) have demonstrated that, from the age of 3, good quality learning opportunities in group settings outside the home for part of the day is better than solely parental care (Karoly et al, 1998; Love, Schochet and Meckstroth, 1996 ; Myers 1995).

Many studies in both the minority and increasingly in the majority world have used a range of sophisticated research tools to evaluate the social and cognitive gains for children over the short and longer term. However, the most powerful findings are still those that tell us about some of the impacts of ECD on everyday life. For example the stunning figures from one of the most famous ECD studies of all - the High-Scope Perry Preschool study that showed 84% of the programme girls finished high school versus 35% of the controls; that the control group was twice as likely to be arrested as the programme group. In fact some of the early longitudinal studies in the U.S. and Europe which were focused on narrow cognitive measures, were misleading as these were quite often seen to fade out whereas the gains for children in terms of continuing to do well in school (due to high levels of motivation) continued.

In this article, we do not focus on formal readiness assessments. There is much work being undertaken in this area and plenty of debate around such assessments. It is an area fraught with potential problems. The key issues around readiness assessment revolve around the costs, the difficulties of accurate assessments with young children, availability of relevant and appropriate follow-

up systems and, more importantly, the risks that such assessments are misused. The younger the child the more difficult and expensive it is to obtain reliable and valid measures of development. However well-intentioned it is sometimes impossible to avoid such assessments being used to either label children in inaccurate, unfair and unhelpful ways or actually exclude them from education opportunities. Ongoing assessment (whether instinctive or more formal) is an integral part of quality teaching: finding out what the child can do/ is ready to do next. However, this is very different to the narrower way that school readiness sometimes ends up being used.

The thrust of this paper is that it is the responsibility of schools to be ready for children who will inevitably be at varying levels of readiness to make the most of the learning opportunities being made available to them and that good supports during the pre-school years will greatly increase that readiness. Kagan and her colleagues were very clear in their recommendations to the US National Education Goals Panel, "Before age 5 large-scale assessment systems designed to inform policy decisions about young children should focus on social indicators that measure the conditions of learning and the adequacy of services in support of children's development" (Shepard et al, 1998).

Improving School Enrolment, Retention, Achievement and Completion

Ministries of Education worldwide have to make hard choices about where to allocate resources. More and more are recognizing that investment in ECD programmes is crucial in increasing primary school enrolment and completion rates to which they are held most accountable. Early childhood programmes are especially important in improving enrolment, retention and achievement for girls and disadvantaged groups.

Mingat and Jaramillo (2003) used **data from 133 countries** to look at the correlation between **preschool enrolment and primary completion** as well as preschool enrolment and **repetition** rates in primary school. The figures are impressive. They found completion rates of 50% in the absence of preschool, and around 80% where half the children have access to some sort of preschool or ECD centre. When they looked at repetition they found absence of preschool experience correlated with 25% repetition; preschool enrolment of 45% correlated with a reduction of repetition to 12%. Note: It might be thought that these findings simply reflected the fact that richer countries are more likely to have both higher ECD enrolment rates and better completion rates. This is not the case. Controlling for per capita GDP makes very little difference.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study in the UK (Sylva et al, 2004) compared children who attended pre-school and "home" children, who had no pre-school experience. 3000 children were studied from age 3+ until the end of the first 3 years of school. The study found that pre-school experience enhances all-round development and that the benefits increased with length of pre-school experience. Every month of pre-school attendance from age 3 is linked to better intellectual development and improved independence, concentration and sociability. Whether children were in part-time (5 sessions a week) or full-time (10 sessions) programmes made no difference.

The **Nepal** ECD Impact study entitled "**What's the Difference?**" (Save the Children/UNICEF, 2003) is a good example of the sort of data which governments need. The study, which was conducted in a district which has some of the worst education indicators in the country, looked at critical numbers and trends – enrolment, pass rates, drop-out and repetition – and at gender and caste breakdowns for these. It found high levels of significance in the results. More than 95% of children who went through the ECD centres (which deliberately targeted disadvantaged families) ended up in school as opposed to 75% of their peers who had not participated in the ECD programme. The Grade 1 repetition rate for children from the ECD group was one seventh of the rate for children who had not participated in the programme. The ECD children pass their grade 1 and 2 exams at markedly higher rates (32% and 38% higher respectively) than their other classmates. Continued tracking has found that 80 percent of the 2000 cohort has been moving through school with no failure or repetition. Projecting from these 2004 results, these children are more than twice as likely to complete primary school within five years as the average Nepali student. Over four years, the annual drop-out rate has been only 1.2 percent, or about one tenth of the national figure. The most recent primary school completion rate (2003) indicates that only 50 percent of enrolled students nationally ever complete grade 5 – including all those who repeat along the way. It is projected that over 90 percent of the ECD children will complete grade 5.

Similarly in **Peru** a recent study found that nearly 60% more poor children who participated in pre-school completed primary school as compared with poor children who did not access preschool (Aldaz-Carroll, 1999). The **Promesa Project** in **Colombia** also found dramatically higher primary school enrolment rates among children that had participated in the programme (51 percent) as compared to non-participants (17 percent) as well as lower repetition rates.

The **India** Village Preschool study (Zaveri, 1993) looked at the impacts of Day Care Centres in Gujarat and compared a programme group and matched controls. By the end of the second year programme children showed significant gains in cognitive ability, confidence and ability to relate to others. The programme children were twice as likely to enrol in school and scored significantly higher than the control group on language, maths and environment tests which were conducted during the first two years of primary school. Many studies across India indicate a sustained and cumulative impact right through primary school. A study in eight states found that while nearly half of children with no early childhood education had dropped out by the fourth grade, it was less than one third for children that came from an early childhood programme (Chaturvedi, 1987)

The **Turkish Early Enrichment Project** (Kagitcibasi et al, 2001) was implemented in low-income, low education areas of Istanbul. The studies demonstrated the dramatic effects of on school attainment and retention for children from a poor urban area. Seven years after the programme 86% of the children whose mothers had participated in the programme were still in school compared to 67% of those who had not. Children who had been exposed to either type of intervention (mother training or preschool programmes), compared to those who had not, exhibited higher school attainment, were more likely to attend university, began their working lives at a later age and had higher occupational status.

Cuba's early childhood programme reaches more than 98% of children in the 0-6 age group. It has had measurable success in increasing the educational achievements of Cuba's children. Cuban third graders score significantly higher in maths and Spanish than their counterparts on the same test in 11 Latin American countries, many of them far wealthier than Cuba (Casassus et al, 1998).

A study from **Myanmar** (Lwin et al, 2004) using matched pairs to compare children with and without ECCD opportunities found high levels of significance in the gains for the ECCD children when they went to school. These included: higher enrolment rates, enrolment at the appropriate age, better scores on both regular school tests and independently administered individual assessments (during the first three years of school). And, a study from **East Africa** (Uganda, Zanzibar and Kenya) tracked children attending two types of preschool programmes (one the AKF supported Madrasa Programme and a similar equivalent) as well as children who stayed at home through their preschool years. All preschool children did better than children staying home and those attending the madrasa preschools had particularly strong results in language during the preschool period. Advantages of preschool participation in terms of success in school continued into primary school through all grade which were tracked - Grade 4 by 2006 (Mwaura 2005, 2006).

What's the explanation?

Studies from around the world - whether they have followed children for only a few years or through adolescence - show clear evidence of significant differences between children who have participated in early childhood programmes and those who have not. ECD programmes are associated with higher levels of achievement and better adjustment in school. It is not only their marks which are better. These differences are attributed mainly to differences in **attitude and motivation**.

Significant reductions in school failure, repetition, absenteeism, and drop-out rates were found in the vast majority of the studies looking at the effects of ECD in US and Europe. ECD programme children had greater interest and motivation, were more committed to doing homework, were able to work independently, and participated more in extra-curricular activities. They had greater confidence in themselves and higher aspirations for their futures. As Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart (1993) observe, ECD programmes seem to produce their long-term effects through "engendering the dispositions in children that enable them to achieve greater success as they begin school. This early success breeds higher motivation, better performance, and higher regard from teachers and classmates." Barnett (1998) points out that even when the quality of schooling is poor, the persistence of the benefits of ECCD is consistent with our understanding of the active role children play in their own learning.

This may explain why the Nepal study (2003)—within a very different context—has some key similarities in findings to those of the Western studies. It attributes the children's success to the **impact on the children themselves, and the effects that this has on both parents and their teachers when the children go to school**. The children are identified by their parents, teachers, and other children as being self-assured, capable, articulate, and highly motivated, as well as neat and clean, respectful and helpful. (This finding is repeated in numerous studies and evaluations from East Africa and South Asia). The parents describe the increased interest they take in their children. The teachers appreciate their students as eager learners and sometimes enlist their help in assisting other children in the class.

The Effects of Quality

The positive relation between the quality of children's early experiences and virtually every facet of their development is "one of the most consistent findings in developmental science" (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000). Not surprisingly EPPE found that high quality pre-schooling is closely correlated with better intellectual and social development (Sylva et al, 2004). Quality indicators used include warm interactive relationships with children and having a trained teacher as a manager. A review of U.S. research is interesting in this context. It also indicates that programme quality correlates strongly with children's development and well-being (Love et al. 1996). However, the research shows that the interaction between the facilitator and the children is associated more strongly with enhanced well-being of children than are structural features such as class size, staff-child ratio, and staff training. In other words, it is the dynamics that really count. This is heartening for those working in situations where many of the structural features are hard to address.

The bottom line is quite simply this: where resources to provide quality learning experiences are limited, children will benefit most from having those experiences early.

Addressing Discrimination and Exclusion – critical to meeting EFA goals

The disastrous effects of poverty and exclusion (as discussed above) are well-known - affecting both children's development and the development of nations. The findings of studies examining ECD's efficacy in addressing these issues are important because it is the traditional failure of children from disadvantaged groups (ethnic minorities, girls, poor children) to stay in the system that makes it difficult to meet key EFA commitments and Millennium Development Goals. There is plentiful **worldwide evidence that the most disadvantaged children – whether because of poverty, ethnicity, gender, rural isolation, or disability – experience the most dramatic gains from ECD. Those who need it most get the most out of it.**

The analysis for the World Bank of a large-scale project in **Egypt** compared the benefits according to socio-economic status (Padeco/AED, 2001). As the authors put it "The benefits for children from the poorest families with the least educated parents can be extremely high. In contrast children from middle income or richer families usually enjoy a home environment which is relatively conducive to healthy child development. This is not to say that ECD programmes will not support all children, whether rich or poor. However, it does mean that the impact will be more impressive for the poorest."

The North Carolina **Abecedarian study** demonstrated that an intensive intervention can compensate for the disadvantages of poverty. Many of the parents in the Abecedarian study had had very little education and very low IQ levels and these high risk children were able to achieve at the same level as their more affluent peers (Campbell et al, 1999). **EPPE** found that disadvantaged children benefit significantly from good quality preschool experiences, especially where they are with a mixture of children from different backgrounds (Sylva et al, 2004). Similarly, although in a very different context, a study in **Guinea and Cape Verde** found preschool compensated disadvantaged children for the lack of supports available in the home environment (Jaramillo and Tietjen, 2001).

The Harayana study in **India** found that participation in the ICDS programme did not have an impact on drop-out for high-caste children, but the **lowest castes** showed a subsequent reduction in drop-out of 46% (Chaturvedi et al, 1987). The **Nepal** study demonstrated dramatic gains for **dalit** (untouchable) children who are still socially ostracized despite discrimination on the basis of caste being illegal. In a district where the District Education Office estimates only 30% of **dalit** children are in school more than

95% of the *dalit* children with ECD programme experience enter school. Their drop-out and repetition rates were extremely low – drop-out in Grade 1 was half the national average and continued low through Grade Five. Parents will even challenge schools. A dalit girl who had passed her Grade 1 examination was not promoted to Grade 2 due to a mix-up. The child's parents went to the school and insisted that she be promoted. This may appear an obvious response to this kind of mistake. But for dalit parents whose rights are so routinely denied it is a major step to do something this assertive on behalf of their child.

As Kabiru and Hyde (2003) wrote, "The opportunity for additional nutritional, health and educational inputs at an early age can address the developmental delays that are more likely to affect poorer children. ECD programmes can promote equity, for not only can the children benefit when they are young, but the benefits continue throughout their school careers." Giving children a good start not only attacks the worst effects of poverty, it may also be the most effective way of breaking the relentless cycle of poverty transmitted across generations.

However, programmes in the main part, fail to reach the most disadvantaged children which they should be targeting. MICS2 studies in 48 countries found marked inequities according to income levels, maternal education and whether or not parents lived in a town (UNICEF, 2002).

Gender equity

Within the whole range of exclusion issues, EFA gives special attention to addressing gender issues. ECD interventions can promote gender equity by compensating for gender biases in nutrition, healthcare or stimulation. When young girls participate in ECD programmes, parents' attitudes toward their girls often shift. In addition, older girls who have been the traditional childminders - while their mothers and fathers work - are freed up by ECD programmes to go to school. In addition, ECD teachers (the vast majority of whom are women) tend to provide positive role models, especially for girls (GMR, 2003/4; Evans, 1997; Myers, 1997; LeRoux, 2002).

A number of studies, including the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study and a large Irish study have indicated that the benefits of early childhood programmes tend to be greatest for girls (World Bank, 2006). Myers (1995) points out that in both India and Guatemala girls who participate in ECD programmes are much more likely to join school at the appropriate age. The previously mentioned Nepal study repeated this finding and also found that the ECD programme was extremely effective at getting and keeping girls in school and dramatically improved boy-girl ratios in early primary with boys and girls entering Grade 1 in equal numbers. A study in Brazil (World Bank, 1999) found that poor girls who had attended pre-school were twice as likely to reach Grade 5 and three times as likely to reach Grade 8 as girls who did not.

In many Western countries as well as parts of the Caribbean it is now the boys who are under-achieving. The EPPE study found that boys tended to have lower home learning environment scores (are read to less, etc.) and also benefited greatly from the ECD interventions (although not as much as the girls).

The Broader Implications for Poverty Reduction

Centre-based programmes can be critical for hard-pressed families. They provide a range of immediate benefits (safe, healthy, stimulating environments for children and childcare for parents). They can serve as bridges for both children and families, enabling the children to do better in school and families to improve their economic status through making it possible for mothers to work outside of the home.

Changing parents or changing the system?

As Evans (2000) points out, systems are set up in ways that exclude or marginalize certain children. Health services can be inaccessible or unaffordable. Education and employment opportunities can be closed to certain groups. In such situations ECD programmes may also need to help to change the system. Parenting programmes strengthen families' abilities to support their children's overall development from a young age. The best ones also provide information regarding local service provision and encourage parents to have a sense of their children's entitlements. For example, if the health post has been closed for much of the last six months but parents know there is budget for a full-time health worker, they are in a much better position to organize and put pressure on the authorities

to recruit. If parents know their district has been allocated a certain number of ECD centres they can lobby to get one in their village. We are beginning to see a shift in the approaches used in parenting programmes. They not only seek to enhance parents' direct efforts to provide for, protect, and support their children's overall development, but also emphasize helping them hold others accountable. Such programmes can help give parents and caregivers an increased sense of control over their lives—providing them with information and building their confidence and **sense of agency to act on their own behalf and on behalf of their children**. Such an approach strengthens the abilities of families and communities to cope with difficult situations that both lead to and emerge from poverty.

The **Turkish study** (Kagitcibasi, 2001) cited above which had such dramatic effects on school attainment and retention concluded that “Mother training has had long-term effects because it focused on the overall development of the child as well as the well-being of the mother and the family through empowering the key person, the mother, for multiple positive outcomes” The process, which involves not only home visits but also bi-weekly group discussions, changes not only the developmental outcomes for the child but also the context in which the child is raised as well, through the changes that are taking place in the mother (her confidence, communication skills, improved family relations, and status within the family). **“Thus at the end of the intervention children are not left in the same old context, but rather continue in a context which has changed with them and thus can provide them with continued support”**.

There have been similar findings in Pakistan, Nepal, India, Zanzibar and Kenya. The parents of the children who have participated in the early childhood programmes are accustomed to playing an active role in the ECD centres and “*katchi*” classes (classes for preschool age children in Pakistan now formally part of the primary cycle). As the child moves into Grade 1 and on through school the parents are more likely to **talk to teachers**, show an interest in their children's progress, engage actively with the School Management Committee, to **raise issues that concern them, and even to hold teachers and administrators to account**. In a very different context the Harvard family research Project (2002) found similarly that low-income ethnically diverse parents' positive experiences with early childhood programmes prepared them for connecting with elementary school. The PIAR ECD programme for immigrant Muslim communities in the United States had similar findings. Inspired by their children's obvious progress some mothers noted having more confidence to speak in English about their child's development contributing to the child and family's readiness when entering primary school (Brown and Brown, 2005). This increased willingness of parents who have been involved with ECD programmes to engage with the formal school system is an often unanticipated but highly significant outcome. We know that the **involvement of parents is one of the most robust predictors for a child's success in school**

Whatever the factors underlying exclusion or marginalization – gender, poverty, ethnicity, caste, and religion – early childhood programmes are remarkably effective in countering disadvantage and thus setting them on a more positive life trajectory, including that which they travel as they enter primary school.

The Return on Investment: Benefit-to-Cost Analysis

While the benefits of ECD programmes for children and wider society are increasingly being recognised, there is still inadequate investment in ECD. Often, where there are limited resources, governments direct considerable funds to higher levels of education.

As Cleveland and Krashinsky (2003) state, “Since the objections to childcare programmes are often phrased using economic principles, it seems appropriate to meet these objections on the same ground.” Research shows that well-targeted, high-quality early childhood interventions can yield very high economic returns.

The well-known **High-Scope Perry Preschool Study** (1993) included a benefit-to-cost analysis that found a return on investment of **7 to 1**. For every dollar spent, there were seven dollars of savings to society. The authors Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart included a range of items such as savings for the criminal justice system, as well as savings through fewer welfare payments and a lower need for special education programmes. They also calculated in the difference in earnings between the two groups.

Most benefit-to-cost analyses have not had the advantage of such rich and reliable databases and have looked at a much narrower range of benefits specifically related to children's years in school and their projected future earnings. We have sufficient research evidence to affirm that every year of added education improves a person's later income. The economic literature on education estimates that one extra year of primary education will increase a person's future productivity by 10–30%, varying country to country. ***The benefit-to-cost ratios are greatest for the group with the worst social indicators*** (high infant mortality, high malnutrition, low school enrolment). Studies by the World Bank and other agencies in Bolivia, Colombia and Egypt have tended to estimate returns on ECD programming of around **3:1**.

The returns can almost double if programmes target children most at risk. This is because the most disadvantaged children benefit the most from ECD. The impact in terms of reducing school drop-out and repetition is much greater for children from poor families than it is for children from better-off families. This is a powerful economic argument for investment in ECD that is targeted to children most at risk. ECD programmes, as an investment, compare favourably in terms of economic rate of return with investments in the so-called "hard" sectors such as infrastructure projects which are often less than 2:1. The conclusion is clear. As World Bank economists Van der Gaag and Tan (1998) state, "Societies cannot prosper if their children suffer. ECCD programmes are a sound investment in the well-being of children and the future of societies. By breaking the intergenerational cycle of deprivation, ECCD programmes are a powerful tool for obtaining the ultimate objective of development to give all people a chance to live productive and fulfilling lives" (1998). The Economics Nobel Laureate Heckman (1999) argues that investments in disadvantaged young children are superior to investments in low-skill adults

Using Common-sense

It is possible, and also critically important, to draw reasonable conclusions about worthwhile investments rather than only doing detailed benefit-to-cost analyses. Brazil's government has done this. Their "Atencao a Crianca" programme is focused on overcoming poverty and social exclusion and includes a significant early childhood component. The project will look closely at the economic gains from inclusion. As they point out, a child in preschool costs no more than \$100, a child on the street \$200, and a child in the penal system \$1000: "The costs of exclusion are high" (Aduan 2000; Young 2002). Initial investments in young children are far less costly than programmes that seek to remedy deficits incurred in the early years. Building prisons to house troubled youth and adults from money saved through cuts to health and education is inefficient. Doryan, Gautam, and Foege (2002) refer to this kind of social myopia as "Inefficient and with heart-rending and society-rending effects."

When results from low-cost community based programmes are as dramatic as they often are in the poorest countries, it doesn't take complex economic or longitudinal analysis for policy-makers to see that the ECD investment makes sense. In Brazil, there were dramatic increases in the grade completion rate, from 2% to 40%, as a result of a community-based ECD programme. In Nepal the drop-out rate halved, and grade repetitions reduced to less than one fifth.

Reduced repetition—a critical benefit which diverse ECD programmes have demonstrated—increases the efficiency and decreases the costs of schooling.

The Importance of tracking children through school

There is currently a priority need in developing countries for more studies that follow children into school and look at basic education indicators of enrolment, retention and achievement. In a context where many children never make it beyond the first few grades of school these basic figures are extremely meaningful. They may not give us such accurate information about a child's developmental level but whether or not the child continues in school will have a powerful impact on his or her life chances. The evidence indicates that even in situations where the quality of schooling is poor, children with ECD programme experience somehow maintain an "edge".

If tracking was done on a more systematic basis – including capturing whether children have participated in an ECD programme – we would have important information to share with educators, policymakers and families.

We have seen the extensive benefits that ECD programmes have for children, their families and wider

society. ECD programmes help to create children “ready” for school and the world beyond. The question then becomes: Are schools ready for children?

PART III

SCHOOLS AND THEIR READINESS

Narrowly academic definitions of children's readiness for school (see p.4) have now been replaced with **broader definitions** which emphasize the importance of not only cognitive competencies but also physical, social, emotional and motivational factors. The way we look at schools is changing in similar ways. Schools are recognized as being highly significant personal and social environments in the lives of their students. Quality education is increasingly accepted as being not only concerned with academic learning, but also with the child's social development, their emotional and physical well-being, and protection from harm.

Child-friendly, rights-based schools and other similar initiatives developed by UNICEF, Save the Children, PLAN and others are some of the best-known expressions of 'Ready Schools'. In practice, whatever they are called, the best of the initiatives addressing quality in schools have many common threads connecting their approaches. In addition to access to free education for all children, the central tenet of keeping **the best interests of the child** centre stage results in an emphasis on:

- **Quality and purpose**
 - Teaching and learning processes appropriate to the child's developmental level and learning style – an emphasis on active, participatory, structured learning methods, problem-solving, critical thinking etc.
 - Good learning outcomes
- **Relevance**
 - Education based on reality of children's lives/strong connections between home, community and school
 - Curriculum
 - Language of instruction
 - Flexible school calendar
 - Strong community involvement in School Management Committees
 - Parental involvement with school
- **Active promotion of equality, respect and inclusion in a supportive, nurturing, safe and healthy learning environment**
 - Teachers' and children's behaviour - respect for each others' rights, dignity, diversity and equality (no discrimination with regard to gender, ethnicity, religion, economic status, ability, etc.)
 - Materials and lesson content
 - Conduct regulated - no bullying, physical punishment, abuse, humiliation
 - Healthy physical environment (clean, safe, water, toilets)
 - School's active role in respecting/ assisting promote children's rights – challenging stereotyping and exclusion
- **Participation**
 - Participation of students, parents, and other stakeholders in school decisions and reforms

In short for a school to be "ready" for children it must develop an environment in which all children are able to learn. Thus, one where **staff members are welcoming and appreciative of children's efforts, ensure their safety and sense of security, and provide effective learning opportunities which enable children to interact effectively with their world.**

ARE SCHOOLS READY?

While the above features which determine how "ready" and able a school is to provide a positive learning environment have an important impact for all children this is greatly **magnified for younger children entering school for the first time** – especially for those who may not have a well-established network of friends for support. How young girls and boys fare, how they feel in the early days and weeks, how they are viewed and treated as learners with (or without) capacities, imagination, etc is critical. It can be a time of stress, anxiety and insecurity or it can be a time of anticipation, new friends and challenges, creativity, enjoyment of learning and confidence as a learner. Both are possible, both exist throughout the world in classrooms everywhere.

EARLY DROP-OUT AND REPETITION

In far too many classrooms the story is not a happy one. There is a major crisis during the first critical years of primary education across many parts of the developing world. Many **children are dropping-out altogether or repeating classes – the vast majority within the first two years**. The problem is at its worst in countries where poverty, exclusion and other systemic factors exacerbate the situation (overcrowded classrooms, extremely high teacher-child ratios, early or late enrolment into grade 1 etc).

According to the 2005 Global Monitoring Report, in Guinea-Bissau, Rwanda, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar and Nepal more than half the children who enrol either repeat first grade or drop-out. Of the countries for which drop-out information by grade was available (63 countries), Grade 1 drop-out rates are at least double those in Grade 2. In South Asia, where around 35% of all out-of-school children live, more than 3 times the number of students drop-out of Grade 1 compared to those dropping out in Grade 4. In Belize children are sixty times more likely to drop-out in Grade 1 than in Grade 2.

While most of Latin America has made considerable progress towards the EFA goals, the situation remains bleak in pockets. In Columbia, 19% drop-out before completing Grade 1; also problematic is the fact that primary boys are repeating and dropping out more than girls –the reverse of what we see in many other countries. In Brazil, 6% of enrolled children drop-out before completing grade 1, and 31% repeat first grade.

	Dropout Grade 1	Dropout Grade 2	Overall Dropout Primary	Repetition Grade 1	Repetition Grade 2	Overall Repetition
Belize	11.9	0.2	20.5	14.1	8.3	9.8
Brazil	6.1	4.6	20.1	31.1	19.1	21.5
Equatorial Guinea	23.3**	3.1**	67.4**	48.1	40.2	40.5
Guinea-Bissau	28.5	9.8	72.5	23.9	26.9	24.0
Madagascar	16.3	12.2	66.4	37.8	29.6	30.5
Nepal	10.2	1.2	22.2	39.9	17.1	21.6
Rwanda	15.7	11.2	71.4	36.7	27.0	36.1

Source: Global Monitoring Report, 2005

** UIS Estimates

National figures hide disparities within countries. In India, nationally, 12% of students dropped out in Grade 1 from the 2003-2004 cohort. In the state of Rajasthan, drop-out rates were almost double this (21%) whereas in Kerala, the figure was only 2.2%. Similarly, repetition rates in Grade 1 for the two states are 20.25% and 0.34%, respectively (Mehta, 2005).

Completion of primary education is a core milestone. It impacts later productivity, HIV/AIDS prevalence (especially true for girls), family size, and the quality of care for children (Brunns, Mingat and Rakotomalala, 2003, UNESCO GMR on Gender, 2003). Unfortunately, the focus on completion may be hindering attention to the heart of the problem: millions of children leave within the first and second years of entering school.

Inefficiencies in primary education

The problem of inefficiencies in education systems is very real. In many developing countries it takes an **average of 1.4 years to complete a grade**. A range of issues and problems must be addressed in order to reduce repetition and drop-out thus improving the efficiency and lowering the costs of schooling.

The long road to Completion

In Mozambique, only 1 out of each 7 students accessing primary education in the Cabo Delgado region complete grade 5 (Perfil da Educação Cabo Delgado, Ministry of Education, 2004). In Latin

American rural areas, two out of every five children fail to finish primary school and overall students repeat at least two years of school over the span of basic education. (UNESCO UIS 2001, UNESCO 2005). In Belize it takes, on average, ten student years to produce a 6-year primary school graduate (UNESCO UIS, 2001). In Lao PDR, it takes almost double the time to graduate from the 5-year primary school cycle. In some regions of the country, the average is three times as long (ABD LAO education Sector, 2000). In Uganda, approximately 50 percent of primary students complete primary education - but the on-time completion rate is only 3 percent (DHS Survey 2002, Cameron 2005). In Cambodia government data (1999) reveals some of the lowest levels of efficiency. A student spends 14.3 years on average to complete the 6 year primary cycle. Those who support children's education (government and families) must pay for the economic and opportunity costs of additional years in the system.

In addition, the large numbers of drop-outs each year add to the already large numbers of out-of-school children. Over 100 million children are still not enrolled in school, out of which 55% are girls. In Africa and South Asia, almost as many children drop-out as are already not in school in those regions, doubling the number of children not receiving primary education.

Poor Learning

Those who manage to survive often have insufficient levels of the essential foundational literacy and problem-solving skills required for success in other subjects (Carnegie report, 1996 UNESCO, 1998). Research suggests that if children cannot read after about three years of education they probably never will. They may be promoted regularly and complete school but they will be functionally illiterate, and their many years of education will not improve their incomes. Surveys in Peru and Romania, for example, demonstrate that more than half of school graduates are functionally illiterate (Nielsen, 2005). Professor McGuinness (2004) says that 43% of 9 year olds in US (who will already be in at least their 4th year of education) are functionally illiterate. In Honduras 9 out of 10 sixth graders performed at "low" or "insufficient" levels in mathematics and language assessments (Honduras Ministry of Education, 2002 in GMR 2005). The situation is similar in African countries. In Malawi 1%, and in Zambia a mere 2% of students have achieved "desirable" levels of proficiency by the end of grade 6 on SACMEQ assessments (GMR 2005).

A recent study (ASER, 2005) of over 9500 villages across 485 districts in India tested children's reading and maths skills – the results are fairly sobering. More than one-third of the school-going 7-14 year-olds could not read simple paragraphs at Grade 1 level. 40% of children studying in Grade 5 could not read a story text at Grade 2 level. Similar problems with maths emerged. The summary from the ASER study emphasizes the serious and significant gap in terms of whether and what children are actually learning. It goes on to state "The foundations of our children's basic reading and arithmetic needs to be strengthened in the early grades in school. A strong beginning is essential for building a solid foundation for elementary education."

Education in the early primary years must focus on ensuring competent readers. The ability to read and comprehend what one reads is essential for learning in other subject areas. Why are schools so weak in teaching disadvantaged children to read? Schiefelbein (1991) attributes this in part to the very much smaller vocabularies which poor children have when they enter school and their lack of exposure to print and opportunities to enjoy books at home. The skills needed to teach a child with a 600 word vocabulary are different from those needed to teach a child with a 3,000 word vocabulary. As Abadzi emphasizes in her forthcoming book (2006), the failure of the first year or two of school to establish basic literacy and numeracy skills "creates inefficiencies that reverberate all through the system". Abadzi (2006) also discusses using learning achievement assessments to improve teaching/learning processes in schools. Her analysis of available studies illustrates that standardized achievement tests – usually given to students in Grades 4-6 when it is certain that they can respond – are often disappointing. Unfortunately, no-one is sure about what interventions are required to address poor learning outcomes since little information exists on performance in lower grades.

A pilot study on the teaching of initial reading in an AKF school improvement programme in Uganda (the Enhancement of Universal Primary Education in Kampala – EUPEK) offers further insights (Rwanyonga, Omoding and Kakooza, 2005). Having identified problems with both teaching and learning of reading the EUPEK team designed a pilot intervention that introduced phonics methods using a multi-sensory approach. The programme had earlier delivered batches of books which were rotated to promote an enhanced literacy 'climate' in the school. A review found that there was a lack of

effective use of readers and action research revealed that, prior to the intervention, reading lessons were scheduled but were rarely taught. Reading was seen as a tool for keeping children busy while their teacher was absent – it was not for enjoyment and understanding. Teachers did not feel confident in teaching children **how** to read. In-service training, visits to classrooms where teachers were using phonics competently, reflection workshops and regular guidance for Grades 1 and 2 teachers produced encouraging results. Children's reading improved and teachers gained skills and confidence in teaching reading and recognized how reading skills helped students across subjects. Similar larger-scale research studies are urgently needed if we are to understand how best – in different contexts – to improve early literacy development.

This scenario of high early drop-out, inadequate early literacy development, etc in the early primary years -- repeated across countries and regions and with differences within countries – often gets lost in global figures of net enrolment, completion and drop-out. It is a tragedy of high wastage for education systems as well as for the individuals and communities involved. (See Annex 1 for matrix of early drop-out and retention and corresponding GER for preschool.)

Cost of inefficiency

Inefficiencies to the system substantially reduce the capacity of school systems to be able to provide education for all. In cases of repetition, students that take more than one year to complete a grade are taking up classroom space, teachers' time, textbooks, and other financial and human resources already scarce that could be devoted to other students and to bringing those not enrolled into school.

In developing nations, the average combined drop-out and repetition is about 30%, which means that systems are massively inefficient. The financial implications are enormous. In the Cambodia example above, where the student takes an average of more than 14 years to complete the primary cycle, the Asian Development Bank estimates that an additional 10,000 teachers and 5,000 more classrooms – an increase of 20 percent of education resources – are needed in order for repeaters to finish school. However, 75% of the total cost of repetition (\$40 million) is calculated as “household's contribution”. Staying in primary school for more than 8 extra years means that students will be much older than normal when moving into work or secondary school. As children grow older, the economic value of their labour likewise increases. Thus, the opportunity costs to families for education are greatly increased and are a significant disincentive.

In Uruguay, In 2004, repetition rates in Grade 1 are about 18.9%; more than 11,000 students repeat first grade and more than 6,000 repeat second grade. For repeaters alone, the education system would need to hire an additional 1,100 teachers. Salaries for these extra teachers are estimated at \$3.9 million, annually. If repetition in the first two grades was reduced to 10%, then salaries would be 59% lower, resulting in savings of approximately \$1.6 million (Independent Evaluation Group, 2006).

The social implications of inefficiency are borne by both the individual and the society. Children who drop-out or continually repeat classes become adults who are illiterate low skilled workers. This reduces a society's ability to be economically competitive, and reduces the likelihood of sparking change and growth in communities. In urban areas, these children are more vulnerable to child labour, organized gangs, and contribute to other problems of delinquency and crime (UNESCO, 1998).

WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE THE FAILURE AND SUCCESS OF SCHOOLS TO OFFER ADEQUATE EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES TO ALL CHILDREN?

Numerous studies and reports have identified and outlined in clear terms the factors which work against both educational access and learning achievement. What is less discussed is how these factors come together in specific and debilitating ways in Grade 1 as children enter primary classrooms. We now turn to looking at the factors which affect ***the readiness of schools to offer children effective learning opportunities.***

Family and Community: Social, Cultural and Economic Issues

The poorer you are the less likely you are to go to school. In Latin America and the Caribbean 84% of out of school children belong to the poorest 60% of households. In Eastern and Southern Africa the figure is 80%. The critical ***link between poverty and school failure*** is well established (Abadzi, 2006);

UNESCO EFA report "Wasted Opportunities: When Schools Fail" (1998). Schiefelbein points to the link between drop-out and repetition rates and their association with and reinforcement of social and economic inequalities (in Myers, 1993). "The lower the education and income of parents, the higher the percentage of children that repeat a grade. Repetition affects the most deprived students to a greater extent, especially those: (i) living in isolated rural areas or mono-linguals speaking a native language, and (ii) those just joining grade one of the educational system."

Children's work

Poverty drives many children to work. Estimates show that almost one-fifth of the world's children (more than 200 million) aged 5-14 are engaged in work (ILO, 2002). **Competing demands for time** of students is a key factor that is weighed at the level of the household and is clearly related to the economic circumstances of the families. Families' need for children's labour contributions, the opportunity and actual costs of education, and perceived relevance for future earnings or marriageability are considerations for parents as they determine whether or not to enrol their children. Many parents decide after a few years that education is not worth the investment. Others send children late. Sometimes parents who require their daughters to contribute substantially to household work and their sons to engage in market work decide it not worthwhile to send them to school at all; sometimes the children themselves decide that school is impeding their work – and then drop-out of school.). According to an IPEC multi-country study, children's work, even in limited amounts, is related to a reduction in school attendance and in length of schooling. (Ray and Lancaster, 2004). Calls on children's time at home can become even more complex where one or both parents are not around due to illness (e.g. HIV/AIDs), migration (temporary or long-term) or conflict. Pressures on parents mean reduced family support, including help with homework. The lack of parental support can affect a child emotionally and can lead to lack of attention to the school work of the child (Lusk and O'Gara, 2002).

Cultural beliefs and Parental assessment of relevance

It is no surprise that parents and families weigh decisions about who attends and for how long, based on their assessment of the realities in their local context (Alderman, Orazem and Paterno, 1996; Odaga and Henevald 1995). Most parents want a better future for their children. However there will be many opinions as to what children's "best interests" are. We have to recognize that sometimes dominant beliefs can be damaging - e.g. beliefs that girls should not be educated or that children should be beaten. Programmes have to find ways to challenge such things and champion children's rights - but from within the culture or community. Culture is neither static nor homogenous and there are always many different beliefs within a given culture.

Often parents may simply be uncomfortable in having anything to do with schools and school personnel (who may have the most formal education in the area and may not be from the area). This is especially true for those who themselves never went to school or were unsuccessful, and often means that as issues arise they will likely not be discussed. Enabling parents' sense of agency in relation to their girls and boys is both critical and possible.

Whether local schools meet the standards of quality, relevance and safety in parents' eyes can play a deciding factor in what actually happens. The growth of both community and fee-paying private schools serving low-income families in many countries (some with partial support from governments) has been linked to parents' concerns regarding the available public school system's quality and relevance (Kim, Alderman and Orazem, 1998; Alderman et al, 1996; Bray and Lillis, 1988).

Geography and settlement patterns

Where families live can affect enrolment, drop-out and repetition (Myers, 1993). In mountainous areas, the terrain between home and school may be very difficult to negotiate for small and young children (as well as for girls more generally). In addition to walking long distances, confronting barriers such as fast moving and deep rivers may make arrival at school difficult, particularly during rainy/snowy seasons as found in parts of Mali or Pakistan. These factors could be especially important for young children, affecting disproportionately the drop-out or repetition occurring in the first one or two school grades. For young children who have health and nutrition problems, long walks can worsen their status and lead to "false starts" in school (Myers, 1993) that are treated either as drop-out or as repetition.

SCHOOLS AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Just as we looked at factors affecting children's readiness for school we will now examine factors affecting schools' readiness for children – especially the crisis during the initial primary years. Major problems include:

- Exclusion – the gap between families and schools - parents' low levels of involvement with and confidence in schools (language, culture etc.)
- Overcrowding, especially in the early grades
- Inadequate teaching methods focused on delivery of information rather than more active and carefully structured learning methods (associated with low levels of teacher confidence and commitment, lack of professional development supports etc.)
- Poor record keeping, resulting in inadequate information.

These problems work in combination to become a self-perpetuating **cycle of failure** in which lower classes become progressively more overcrowded, teachers demoralized, parents and children disinterested and programmes unable to learn from either failures or successes. Responses, to be truly effective, need to address the whole system in an integrated way.

"The challenges of change", a tracer study of San preschool children in Botswana, (le Roux, 2002) reached conclusions which resonate across many settings. The language gap was critical in children dropping out of school early. Corporal punishment was the single most direct reason for children leaving school. Animosity and tension occurred as a consequence of children comparing the formal school with their experience in the preschools. A serious lack of cultural understanding between parents and teachers prevailed. The education system is poorly adapted to the reality of the San children and the routine in school interferes with the children's traditional eating habits.

Trust (or lack thereof) in local schools

The lack of familiarity with teachers assigned to schools by a centralised system and absence of trust in local schools is well-documented as a critical factor that influences parents' views of education – most particularly for their daughters (DFID/SCF UK, 1999; Rugh, 2000; Odaga and Henevald, 1995). Parents' expectations are not always well understood – nor do teachers seek to understand them in many cases. Where the culture and language of the local community is different from that of the teacher, it can create unhelpful mixed messages for the child and his/her sense of identity and belonging. It can also result in misunderstandings that escalate the likelihood of drop-out (some might say push-out) of students. The formal education system is often threatening, not just to the child, but to first learner parents who themselves haven't attended school (AKF, 2006).

Sometimes circumstances conspire to result in children never enrolling in the first place. A concrete example illustrates Many education systems require birth registration documentation when children enrol. Many parents simply do not have this. Moreover, they may not know the exact age of their child – especially common where women give birth at home and/or live far from where registration happens. While birth registration is rightly championed as a means to help ensure children's rights it can be a double-edged sword – particularly where the process for birth registration is hampered by confusing bureaucratic procedures (and completed in the official language). Where parents have to walk long distances or pay for transport (and sometimes the document) to register the process can become too time-consuming and expensive.

Abadzi (2006) and others (including past GMR reports) have described the problems related to ensuring education for children coming from poor and marginalised backgrounds. The key issues that directly affect young learners are discussed below.

Language of Instruction

The home language of the child when different from the language of instruction is a key factor in children's early learning experiences. Many children enter school unable to understand anything the teacher says. In Malawi for example, students in Grades 1 to 4 are often learning some subjects in three or more languages – Chichewa (Malawi's national language), English (the language instruction materials are written in), the teacher's home language and the students' home language (Chilora, 2000, 2001). Not surprisingly, students whose home languages were the same as their teacher's (even if the language of instruction was different) performed significantly better in primary school.

Children's developmental window of opportunity for rapid language learning fades at about the time they enter school. Bilingual programmes (official or unofficial) can be important. This is more difficult, and often impossible, where there are a number of languages in the class. The importance of language of instruction is recognized in numerous studies and reports (Abadzi, 2006; Margetts, 1999; Lockheed and Verspoor, 1990; Benson, 2005) as well as in an increasing number of Government policy documents and national plans. However, constant pressure on education budgets means that the many projects which develop learning resources in minority languages usually result in limited publications that sit in donor agency offices rather than the hands of classroom teachers and children. Even with accumulating knowledge and experience practices on the ground often do not change. More needs to be done, not least because of the critical importance for early learners to become competent readers and communicators – something much easier to accomplish using one's mother tongue where there is already a vocabulary and familiarity.

Class size and Teacher – Child ratios

Grades One and Two classes are notoriously over-crowded and over-subscribed. While there may be mixed and debated results on the effects of large class sizes on student achievement – this does not hold true for the early years of learning. Here results are more consistent (O'Sullivan 2006). Large early grade classes interfere with the capacity of teachers to teach and children to learn. Teaching 75-100+ children in Grade one is not an effective way to instil the key skills and competencies that are critical for later learning and success.

Classroom sizes have increased in countries where the important goal of free universal primary education has been implemented (e.g. East Africa). Immediately following implementation of these policies early grade class sizes ballooned – often to extraordinary levels (150+ in Kenya, 120+ in Uganda). There is often a serious lack of sufficient teachers, space and learning materials, water and toilets to meet the understandable excitement and demand generated by these efforts. In Grades One and Two child:teacher ratios are often so high that offering quality learning environments is simply impossible. The proportion of time spent on effective learning activities (already limited in many countries) decreases to allow for crowd management. The response in many places has been to introduce double and, in some countries, triple shifts resulting in even fewer contact hours for teaching and learning. Policy shifts which keep children's learning opportunities at the fore are required – and a deeper understanding of just how critical the first years are in setting children off on a positive learning trend, especially in the vital areas of literacy development.

Teacher Quality

Teachers are the single most important factor in creating an effective classroom. They can be either the most crucial asset or a major barrier for how young children start off their formal education experience. Teacher absenteeism, rampant in some places, undermines trust and confidence amongst both parents and students. The availability of trusted, motivated teachers who regularly show-up, who have specific training (pre and in-service) to support children's social and emotional development, encourage and promote children's learning and who are supported (rather than only inspected) themselves in their teaching by the school head and system supervisors are all critical to achieving the EFA and MDG goals agreed to by the international community (Shaeffer, 1992 and 2006; Odaga and Henevald, 1995; Bruns, et al, 2003; UNESCO, 1998).

The teachers' status, application of skills and competencies and whether they have access to core teaching and learning materials (e.g. teacher's guides, textbooks), all influence what happens for children and their learning. In practice, the least qualified and least experienced teachers are too often assigned to the lower grades whereas teachers of higher grades (when exams are scheduled) have more access to any training opportunities that come available. The lack of proper training in teaching and promoting literacy skills in order that fluency in reading and writing are achieved is a serious gap for most Grade 1 and 2 teachers in many countries.

A transition study in Jamaica by Bailey and Brown (1998) looking at pre-school and Grade 1 classrooms and practices found satisfactory articulation between pre-school and Grade 1. However, it highlighted the focus on acquisition of facts and emphasized the need for more attention to key skills such as listening, speaking and observing. Moreover, both pre-primary and Grade 1 classrooms needed to improve how classrooms are structured for learning. The authors recommended changes in training of preschool and lower primary teachers to encourage use of more and diverse materials to

create child-centred learning environments, rotational grouping and individualised instruction, and more interaction - between students and teachers and amongst students.

Learning materials

Children's access to materials – particularly to storybooks and manipulatives that can be used in learning early numeracy and problem-solving skills is essential. It is hard to learn to read without books, and hard to establish basic language and mathematics concepts without concrete objects to handle.

The extraordinary challenges facing Grade 1 teachers are often not appreciated. For example, in East Africa, a Grade One teacher often has 100 children enrolled in her class in the first months of school. Up to a third (in Kenya) and fewer elsewhere have attended preschool before enrolling in primary school. The majority have not. Textbooks – especially in the first weeks – may not yet have arrived in the rural schools. The ages of the students range from 4-9+. The teacher – who tends to be viewed as less important than those teaching higher grades – is unlikely to have had specialised teacher training to help her organise, manage and teach the diverse group of students in front of her. There may be at most a chalk board and chalk. Some children may not speak the language used for daily instruction – and the teacher – who may well come from another part of the country may or may not speak the children's home language.

The motivation of teachers may be an influence that operates, in conjunction with, or independently of, their training. Motivation is related to pay scales, to non-monetary recognition, to the treatment and support received from directors and supervisors, and to other more personal factors. An unmotivated teacher may be hard to change, no matter how many materials or training courses are provided (Myers, 1993).

School year calendar, timetable and effective use of time in class

A number of studies as well as concrete lessons from programmes such as the Escuela Nueva (Colombia) and Bodh Shiksha Samiti (India) point to the need to review and adapt the school calendar as well as the daily timetable (Psacharopoulos, 1993; Gowani and Tiwari, 2006). Both allow the school to adapt to the realities and needs of the local context (e.g. harvest times), and the latter provides important flexibility for the teacher to organise the learning opportunities for her/his students – particularly critical in the early years when adequate time needs to be allowed for the development of core literacy and language skills.

INADEQUATE CHILD-LEVEL DATA

At the school and system level, the inconsistent collection and analysis of disaggregated data on drop-out, repetition and achievement by grade (as well as gender). There is need for such data at the school level in order to use and integrate results into individual school development plans as well as at wider system levels from local zones up through district and national levels. Systematic tracking of students is needed – and must begin with being understood by classroom teachers, head teachers and school management committees in order that relevant strategies to address identified problems can be developed and implemented.

Lack of attention to children - especially in early grades – in education reform efforts

Much work has been carried out internationally in the areas of school improvement and school effectiveness (Farrell and Oliveira, 1993; Anderson, 2002). School improvement programmes and education reform efforts bring together professional development and in-class mentoring support for teachers, strengthened school management and leadership, enhanced community engagement and improved system supports. Such programmes all around the world have tended to evolve in similar ways. Initial attention was on teachers and teaching materials within classrooms. Work with principals and School Management Committees was soon highlighted because of their crucial role in setting the school climate and providing effective leadership. 'Whole school' approaches began to emerge which included the engagement of parents and community members. As efforts expanded and evolved, the fact that a school is situated within a wider school system that, in turn, enabled or prevented positive change came into sharp relief. This led to increased emphasis on working for the strengthening and reforming of systems – in many places in conjunction with decentralisation efforts.

While it is essential to give attention to the multiple levels which impact on quality, education reform efforts have sometimes made too many assumptions about the impact of these inputs on children and their learning. They have also been almost uniformly weak in addressing systematically the learning needs and issues at early primary grades even where drop-out and repetition rates in the first two years are highly problematic. This may be due to not reviewing and disaggregating such data – at the school level - when putting together ‘school development plans’. It may also be related to an insufficient understanding (by planners, development agencies, governments) of what specific teaching and learning processes actually work best at this level – particularly in schools serving poor and marginalised students (Abadzi, 2006). Whatever the case, the challenge now is to understand and look at both the need for system change as well as to follow through all the way to the level of the child in order to ensure that “better learning opportunities for all children” is firmly at the centre of this web of supports and that, within this, attention to learning needs in early grades receives specific attention.

The early years of primary are in many ways a ‘front line’ for the children involved but also for those of us who are striving to reach quality education for all.

MOVING FORWARD: IMPROVING THE TRANSITION PROCESS

School improvement programmes and other education reform efforts must specifically attend to and focus resources on the early grades of primary education. Suggested options follow below, keeping in mind the problems and challenges mentioned in the previous sections.

LEARNING FROM THE HEALTH SECTOR: SYSTEMATICALLY MEASURING ‘SURVIVAL’ OF YEAR ONE IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

The health sector has long measured child survival using two key points in time: year one (Infant mortality rate) and year five (child mortality rate). The rationale is clear – infants are very vulnerable immediately after birth and during the first year of life. Specific strategies for this period such as appropriate pre and post natal care, immunizations, exclusive breast-feeding, etc are well-known by health workers and are the focus of those working with infants and their caregivers. Survival of the first year is a major stepping stone. There are other periods of risk (e.g. weaning) but health workers begin to look to other strategies to ensure healthy development and survival to age 5.

It may be time for the Education sector to initiate a parallel “rate of survival” within basic education cycles. ***Thus, in addition to having data on completion (and achievement) rates at the end of primary, there would be an intermediary indicator of early primary survival.*** In practical terms, it would include regularly stating the promotion rates between Grades 1 and 2 as well as drop-out and repetition from Grade 1, in addition to the already existing data on primary completion rates. Data on early survival in primary school is of particular importance for those countries and regions which are furthest behind in terms of low enrolment and high drop-out and repetition rates – especially for girls and other disadvantaged groups.

Unfortunately, such disaggregated data is not always easily accessible, even from key reports that look at progress on MDG and EFA targets. For example, while the Global Monitoring Report on Quality (2005) included both drop-out and repetition, none of the other three GMRs have consistently provided repetition and drop-out by grade along with overall primary survival rates. Given that the highest rates of drop-out and repetition are almost always during the first year this needs to be available routinely. A handful of other reports and studies have also called for more attention to the problem of inefficiency in the early primary grades (Bruns et al, 2003; UNESCO, 2005b; Abadzi, 2006).

Why is such an intermediary indicator important? Reports produced by development banks and agencies over the last many years offer figures of primary enrolment, repetition, drop-out and completion (e.g. a 57% primary completion rate in 47 low performing countries (Bruns et al, 2003)). What rarely gets articulated is the specific proportion of drop-outs leaving school within the first (and second) year. Where this is problematic, and yet not highlighted, we may be missing out on designing specific strategies which focus on the problem (e.g. ensuring a welcoming environment as children

enter school, training for Grade 1 teachers on the teaching of reading, ensuring more manageable teacher-child ratios at least in Grades 1 and 2, promoting the development and distribution of manipulatives and storybooks, etc).

Improving Policy and Practice

We now turn to the lessons learned that can improve survival during the early grades and thereby primary success and completion; these illustrate what is possible and offer insight into ways forward.

As mentioned, remarkably few of the key international reports give adequate attention to the importance of developing **strategies to address issues in the early primary years**. Bruns et al (2003) make specific mention (albeit somewhat brief) to the importance of including promoting bilingual instruction in the initial years, assigning experienced teachers to the early grades, and combining the first two years as an overall block for instructional purposes. Also encouraging is the forthcoming book by Abadzi (2006). This reviews evidence from research related to improving efficiency and effectiveness of teaching and goes into some depth about learning processes and recommended strategies for teachers (including Grade 1 and 2 teachers specifically) and planners. She advocates a shift in policy to invest more in the lower grades and emphasizes the benefits to the upper grades of such a shift as children move up through the school. For Grades 1 and 2 she promotes longer rather than shorter hours of contact time, smaller classes, clear and consistent classroom strategies including intensive and interactive practice to improve language knowledge, mother tongue teaching of reading and basic concepts (and an emphasis on basic concepts in the early grades), the most experienced teachers, textbooks that can be taken home and the use of additional people who can help children with reading skills etc. (e.g. older students). Specific training for lower primary teachers is also strongly recommended. Skills and knowledge around supporting young learners is essential, specifically addressing the teaching of reading, maths, science for 5-8 year olds etc.

Evidence from the field indicates early primary teachers are very keen to have the chance to improve their skills and knowledge. When the pre-school training and resource group the Madrasa Resource Centre held open days in Kenya and Uganda this led to requests for workshops by grade one teachers. Similarly in the Solomon Islands: when the preparatory classes were introduced into the primary system (prior to Grade 1) the demand from Grade 1 and 2 teachers for training to enable them to introduce similar methods was enormous.

Using a framework of **'Transition'** deliberately links ECD and early primary components. In practice this means working with the neglected lower grades of primary school taken together with support to children's overall development before they ever enter school. The emphasis is on creating a more child-friendly, welcoming and appreciative environment in primary school, as well as introducing the more active learning so characteristic of ECD programmes into Grades 1 and 2. Work with the neglected lower grades of primary school taken together with support to the development of children's overall development before they ever enter school is a powerful combination (Arnold, 2004).

Continuity of developmentally appropriate practice

In North America and Western Europe there has been interest in transition issues for some time (Carnegie, 1996; OECD, 2001). Literature on the transition process strongly emphasises the point that early childhood programmes are most effective if they are part of a broader coherent framework linking early child development initiatives to the child's home and to primary schooling (Lombardi, 1992; Carnegie, 1996; Bertrand, 2004). Margetts' (1999) study from Australia suggests that transition programmes should be concerned with retaining the benefits of preschool programmes, reducing stress, creating an appropriate degree of continuity, responding to the diversity of children's backgrounds and providing positive experiences

Continuity is key. As children move into the early primary years their motor and language skills are becoming more developed, they can pay attention for longer periods, they play more co-operatively, and their interests are widening. However, throughout the preschool and early primary years, children learn best through active exploration of their environment and through interactions with adults, other children and concrete materials. This need for materials in the hands of children in the early grades of primary cannot be over-emphasized. Developmentally appropriate practice, whether at home, in an ECD centre or a primary classroom, should "respond to the natural curiosity of young children, reaffirm

a sense of self, promote positive dispositions towards learning, and, help build increasingly complex skills in the use of language, problem-solving, and co-operation” (Lombardi, 1992). In other words, it facilitates the child’s development as a capable learner.

An important aspect of this is the daily schedule. This has particular resonance for the early primary classes where the critical skills of language, literacy, numeracy and problem-solving require considerable interaction with concrete materials, repeated practice and review of new learning in order to process and ensure deeper understanding and comprehension. As such, a highly divided day with very short periods and too many subjects that are presented in the abstract will work against many young learners (particularly those who are not confident, have not had ECD experience, come to school with a different home language, etc.).

Some countries are moving toward **integrated initial training** across the age span, so that teachers at all levels of the education system share a common theoretical base. **Curriculum frameworks** that bridge pre-school and primary education strengthen pedagogical continuity, and joint in-service training for early childhood and primary staff reinforces links. An OECD multi-country study (2001) looking at a range of policies and programmes related to early childhood provision found that attention to children’s transitions to school led to more policy focus on building bridges across levels including staff training, regulations, administrative departments and curricula.

Risks: Early childhood practitioners often fear that increased co-operation between schools and ECD programmes could result in a school-like approach to the organisation of early childhood provision. Downward pressure to adopt the content and methods of the primary school has a detrimental effect on young children’s learning. Deepening co-operation between schools and levels can be a positive development as long as the specific character and traditions of quality early childhood practice are preserved. Shaeffer summarizes this challenge as experienced in parts of Asia (2006). “To ease the transition do we formalize the informal ...or de-formalize what is usually considered formal? Unfortunately the former seems to be the trend.”

Still, strong partnerships with the education system provide the opportunity to bring together diverse perspectives and methods, focusing on the strengths of both approaches, such as the emphasis on parental involvement and children’s social development in ECD and the focus on educational goals and outcomes in schools. Much more is needed so that ECD and primary education benefit from the knowledge and experience of work with young children that has accumulated in each sector and, in the process, help children and families negotiate the transition to school. Learning goals and curricula frameworks of ECD and primary school programmes need to be coordinated and reviewed regularly as the local context changes (e.g. increased numbers of children coming to grade one with ECD experience over time, diverse language groups).

EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMMES

Below, a range of promising – and often still young – programmes are highlighted that illustrate a variety of approaches and strategies that address problems and challenges regarding transition. Where evaluations or data is available, it is used though many are in the early stages of development. Some of these programmes are conceptualised specifically to address the transition process while others are essentially specific strategies within broader based primary education or ECD efforts. Annex 2 provides a fuller summary of these and other programmes.

Initiatives that deliberately link ECD and primary schools

There are a number of efforts in different regions that demonstrate the **successful “pushing up” of developmentally appropriate practice into the formal system** rather than primary school practices “pushing down”. Experience in **Sweden** has been very positive. Carefully designed education policies and political and financial support enabled primary schools to be more responsive to children’s individual learning needs, in many ways mimicking preschool learning pedagogies. “The Swedish experience shows that this link has potential to galvanize a country’s efforts to make schools more learner-centred, to bring a paradigm shift in education, in which *care, development, and learning* will no longer be foreign concepts alongside *education*” (UNESCO Policy Brief, 2002). In the USA, the **Child-Parent Centre Programme** was part of the Chicago Public School system and often housed at the local primary school. The pre-school and primary school components worked in sync with each

other and assured a high level of learning continuity for child and family. The preschool programme was able to wield more influence on the primary school system, resulting in smaller primary school classrooms, additional resource teachers and low student: teacher ratios. Parental involvement was central - parents dedicating at least half a day a week in the child's classroom. Results included high levels of educational attainment, low rates of repetition and low levels of delinquency (Barnett, 1995, Promising Practices Network, 2003). A similar type of integration of ECD - local primary school and involvement of parents was a key recommendation of the final report of the Early Years Study to the Government of Ontario (McCain and Mustard, 1999).

In **Nepal**, a Save the Children supported transition programme introduced children (during their last few months in the ECD centres) to some of the activities and skills that would be emphasized once they entered school. The programme also arranged visits to the school and ensured the Grade 1 teacher visited the children in the centre. The primary school interventions included working with the whole school to develop a commitment to children's rights. This involved particular emphasis on providing a welcoming and non-punitive atmosphere for all children (especially girls and dalits). And, while general teacher training in child-friendly active learning approaches was provided to all teachers, particular attention was given to those working in the first two grades. For the latter, focus was on ensuring a maximum 50:1 child: teacher ratio in Grade 1. Grade 1 textbooks were used as the basis for creating a hands-on practical teacher training package which facilitated teachers putting active learning into practice. Ensuring that the activities with children were recognized by teachers as helping children learn skills and concepts in the textbooks was seen as critical in getting the buy-in of teachers who had had little in the way of education or professional development support. Low cost/no cost learning materials kits were provided as well. Results include a significant improvement in school attendance, pass rates, promotion and a corresponding reduction in drop-out and repetition (Bartlett et al, 2004; Arnold, 2003). Similarly, the USAID funded SUCCEED programme in Bangladesh focuses specifically on creating a culturally sensitive, affordable model of linked community-based pre-school and early primary education to support the learning of 5-9 year olds.

In **Jamaica**, the pilot '**Pre-Primary to Primary Transitions Programme**', begun in 2001 with support from UNICEF to the government's Basic Education and Early Childhood Education (BEECD) is another emerging example that is linking pre- and primary schools as well as tracking children (ages 4-8) moving between them. The objectives are to improve the quality of teaching and learning in preschools and grades one and two, as well as coordination between the levels, increase parental support for children's learning, and improve attendance and enrolment. The pilot deliberately focuses on literacy through an integrated curriculum (e.g. science activities are incorporated into literacy ones). In-service workshops are attended jointly by both levels of teachers and include modelling for promoting early literacy using a combination of approaches appropriate for young learners. Workshops on supporting early literacy in the home are provided to parents. Early results suggest differential impact on children due to differences of ability, developmental levels, and attendance. The authors note "We are only beginning to understand the magnitude of the task that education and developmental agencies face in providing learning opportunities for children in disadvantaged areas such as those in this study". This honest and sobering statement reinforces the critical importance of looking specifically at what happens in the transition period when children's literacy foundations are being formed.

In **India**, **Bodh Shiksha Samiti** is a Rajasthan NGO pioneering innovative approaches in education for the most disadvantaged in urban slums and rural areas. They work through their own bodhshalas (Bodh's urban non-formal schools, now viewed as a model for replication elsewhere in urban slum areas of Jaipur) and also government schools. Classrooms include plenty of low-cost/no-cost learning materials, there is intensive peer support amongst teachers who undertake continuous assessment of all students – across academic subjects, the arts, social interactions. A strict notion of grades is replaced by having 3 broad clusters or levels amongst which children, age 3 up through 16 or so progress. The impact of Bodh's approach continues to be documented (AKF, 2006; Gowani and Tiwari, 2006) and are particularly strong for girls and other marginalised students. The *bodhshalas* offer a remarkable seamless integration for students from preschool into primary (Govinda, 2006). Bodh supported primary schools have had four times less drop-out in its primary schools than non-intervention schools in Rajasthan (AKF EMIS, 2004).

The **Madrassa Community-Based Early Childhood Programme**, has worked with Madrasa Resource Centre (MRC) support for more than 15 years in Kenya, Zanzibar and Uganda in response

to families desire to give their children a good start – enabling them to succeed in school and at the same time reaffirming local cultural and religious values and knowledge. The community owned preschools offer children (Muslim and non-Muslim girls and boys) a rich learning environment full of locally made manipulatives, active learning and supportive adults. Early on, MRC staff received reports from their preschool teachers, parents and children that when children enrolled in Grade 1 they experienced a serious ‘jolt’ with the change in learning environment. The MRCs began to organise annual Open Days and workshops for Grade One teachers and Headteachers from the schools the preschools feed into. During these sessions, MRC staff have displays of and hands-on experience with many of the the madrasa preschools’ learning materials. This proved effective in engaging their primary colleagues in discussion on ‘active learning’ principles – key for those who view activities in the preschool as “only play” . Requests now regularly come from the early primary teachers for training and support in developing their own teaching and learning materials. Including the headteachers has been critical - as has the madrasa preschool teachers visiting their local primary schools. MRCs are looking to expand their efforts in the area of transition including through sharing of effective practices and advocacy with their government colleagues across the three countries.

Guyana Transition from Nursery to Primary School (Rodrigues, 2000): A research project in 1985 brought nursery school teachers, 1st grade teachers and parents together to discuss the problems that students faced when transitioning between the two levels. The usual disconnects between ECD and the formal system had resulted in many children leaving Grade 1. The initiative led to both groups of teachers agreeing on goals for children, including basic skill and cognitive development, socialization for respect, national consciousness and the extension of learning outside the classroom. Pairs of teachers (one primary and one nursery) began to work together - resulting in home visits, working in smaller groups, establishing ‘corners’ for learning etc. Grade 1 teachers found themselves modifying their classroom activities to be more suitable to the learning styles of younger children.

Strategies Targeting Primary Schools

The **Releasing Confidence and Creativity Programme** (RCC) supported by the Aga Khan Foundation and USAID in **Pakistan** works in poor rural communities in Sindh and Balochistan. Initial discussions were around addressing issues at primary school level as a whole. However, high early drop-out and repetition rates as well as the government’s formalizing of the “katchi” classrooms (which cater to pre-school age children within primary schools) within the primary school system led AKF and implementing partners to re-think. The RCC partners undertook the following: awareness raising of the early childhood period, working with communities to identify local women to train as katchi and lower primary teachers, establishing katchi classes, provision of a ‘katchi kit of activities’ developed by a local NGO partner (the Teachers’ Resource Centre) and encouraging parent and community involvement in the local school (eg as resources to teach local songs, stories and demonstrate specific skills, assisting construction etc). The katchi classes within the government schools in the programme are now the beacons within the schools – a hub of colour and enthusiastic activity. As children enter higher grades, parents continue to expect that their children are taught in an engaging learning environment and, recognizing children’s increased engagement and learning, teachers from higher classes are interested in the methods introduced in the katchi classes.

In **Cambodia** a UNICEF-supported **School Readiness Programme** (SRP) introduced a readiness course in the **first two months** of a child’s formal education, in order to compensate for the lack of formal pre-schooling and generally poor early childhood development experiences in Cambodia (UNICEF, 2004). The Programme resulted in improved learning (measured by a standardized testing instrument). The SRP had a major impact on facilitating learning among repeaters. Follow-up to examine impact on learning achievement in core curriculum (language and math) at the end of Grade 1 found significant impact in 22 out of 25 areas. Differences were particularly large in topic areas relating to Khmer Language and Reading skills. A similar programme introduced into the Philippines some years ago has now been abandoned in favour of making the whole of Grade 1 a more child-friendly learning experience.

In **Mali**, where early childhood provision is almost non-existent, a **“Pedagogie Convergente”** is being introduced. For the first years of schooling, teaching is in the local language, and French is introduced slowly as a foreign language bringing pupils to nationally expected levels in French, by the end of year 6. Initial results during the pilot phase showed that after a year of programme implementation, the children were able to do things – read with understanding and apply calculations beyond simple

memorization – which many third year pupils had not been able to do. Use of local language was seen as the critical factor. “Children understand what they are learning, therefore they can learn” (DFID, 1999)

Escuela Nueva, operating since the '70s as a system of community schools in rural **Columbia**, by the '90s had expanded to 18,000 schools, increasing primary school participation by around 60% (Rugh and Bossert, 1998). The active curriculum encourages children to participate in their learning. In multi-grade classrooms, teachers are trained to work with students using participatory methods and plan lessons responding to students' different abilities and interests. Parent and community involvement are central and participation in adult education, agricultural extension, athletic competition, health campaigns and community celebrations are much higher in Escuela Nueva schools than in neighbouring government schools (Psacharopoulos, Rojas, and Velez, 1993). Compared to students in traditional rural schools, students from Escuela Nueva scored considerably higher on tests given on socio-civic behaviour, 3rd grade mathematics, and 3rd/4th grade Spanish. Children in Escuela Nueva schools were also found to be more confident than their counterparts in government schools and the self-esteem of primary school girls paralleled that for boys, a testament to the holistic, child-centred philosophy used in Escuela Nueva (Coordinators Notebook, 1997). Escuela Nueva is interesting partly because it does not specifically target lower grades. However, because of the welcoming atmosphere, informal structure, self-paced curriculum and flexible time schedules lower primary children have the inclination to continue with their education, while their counterparts in traditional schools are dropping out from 1st and 2nd grade in droves.

The **Step by Step Transition - Primary School Programme** implemented across nearly thirty Central Eastern European and CIS countries establishes an intentional connection and overlap in teaching and learning styles between two normally distinct levels. Where possible, Step by Step transitions children together from pre-school into the same primary classrooms. In preschool, children participate in role activities like 'Play 1st Grade'. Conversely, children from first grade are invited to the preschool to talk about their experiences. Parents and community are also actively involved in the transition between preschool and first grade. Collectively, preschool teachers and parents review the primary school curriculum and discuss the child to make sure he/she has the necessary skills for first grade. Additionally, the primary school teachers are trained in the same pedagogic framework as the preschool. The teachers use the same 7 core modules (individualization, learning environment, family participation, teaching strategies for meaningful learning, planning and assessment, professional development, social inclusion), and are expected to demonstrate identical competencies, but through different observable examples. The Step by Step curriculum is also organized based on age, not grade, since primary school entrance age varied between locations/countries. Non-graded classrooms for the first four years (ages 7-10) of primary education ensure continuity of teaching and learning - teachers use the materials with children in a meaningful way and students thus develop strong foundations in their knowledge of the subject.

WHO IS FURTHERING WORK IN THIS AREA?

At present a handful of agencies are working and addressing the process of early transition in developing countries and regions. International organizations such as Save the Children, Plan International, the Open Societies Institute, Christian Children's Fund, the Aga Khan Foundation, the Bernard van Leer Foundation and UNICEF are examples of those supporting promising work on the ground. There are also a growing number of local/national NGOs – as seen in some of the above examples – that also work on transition. In addition, a small but growing number of researchers based in developing countries have been looking as well at this the area of transition (e.g., Myers, 1993; Mwaura and Nyamwaya 1995; Mwaura 2005; Bailey and Brown 1997-98; Bartlett, Arnold and Sapkota, 2003; a series of 'tracer studies' published by Bernard van Leer Foundation; Abadzi (2006).

Rights-based, child-friendly schools initiatives (see pgs 16-17) have been important in opening up thinking and discussion around what makes a good school - promoting more holistic approaches which encourage attention to children's overall development and learning as well as their health and safety. Yet only a few of these have included adequate attention to issues in the early grades even though this is the time at which the failure of schools to be child-friendly has the most devastating results.

A key contribution of some of these and other school improvement initiatives has been the focus on

the involvement of parents and the wider community. Many encourage school self-assessments – a highly participatory exercise involving teachers, parents, children, school management committee members and district education officials through which they identify local indicators for school quality, assess their school against those indicators and develop a school improvement plan. The importance of parents' role as advocates for their children should not be underestimated. Enhanced family and community engagement with primary schools is much needed – both in terms of support for schools and the sense of schools' accountability to families. This is often much easier to ensure where their children have participated in an ECD programme. Across developing countries it is common to find parents who had perhaps earlier complained that their children were “only playing” in early childhood programmes making the comparison with what is happening in primary schools. Despite initial reservations about child-centred learning methods their children's obvious progress has won them over. There is conviction that their children learned more in the centres and an inclination to discuss this with the school.

A clear lesson coming out of this review is that more needs to be done – both programmatically as well as in terms of monitoring and tracking what happens in the early primary years, including carrying out better and more robust research.

PART IV

CONCLUSIONS: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

There is considerable and accumulating literature regarding the rationale for investing in ECD as a key factor in later success in education (and beyond education to Human Development). Documentation and evidence has grown significantly in the last decade and is emerging from all regions (Young, 1996, Arnold 2004, Bertrand and Beach, 2004, Mustard, 2005). It is also clear that household and school level factors are important when considering how to tackle drop-out, repetition and failure in the education system.

We believe there are 5 key points emerging from this review. The need for

- 1) More and better ECD, including more attention from ECD professionals to 6-8 yr olds
- 2) Better linkages, coordination and understanding between ECD and primary
- 3) More attention to the early grades of primary schools as central to effective education reform
- 4) Parental involvement at all stages
- 5) Better data and information

MORE AND BETTER ECD

There is overwhelming evidence that ECD is an investment that offers outstanding returns at all levels (individual child to national development). However, there are plenty of people who still need convincing. Despite improvements, services for young children obtain nothing like the level of support needed to guarantee every child a good start. Where resources are limited young children are the first to lose out....and it is disadvantaged families who are least likely to access early childhood programmes. In the populous, low income E-9 countries, though there has been a trend to increase preschool participation, many countries still have low enrolments. For example, the good progress made in Mexico (76%) and China (40%) contrasts with that of Egypt (6 %), Pakistan (17%), Nigeria (18%), Indonesia (19%), India (20%), Brazil and Bangladesh (25%) (UNESCO, 2003b). This is even more true in sub-Saharan Africa where participation rates are still often under 5% (GMR, 2001) for most countries. Many of these countries have made considerable strides in improving access to primary education. However, the lack of supports for young children's development means that children are not able to take full benefit from whatever opportunities are made available to them when they enter school.

Actions needed

- Increase coverage of ECD programmes
 - A range of flexible supports available to families that will strengthen their abilities to support their children's overall health and development. Integrate interventions to promote better caregiver-child interactions into all manner of programmes (Primary Health Care, nutrition, school health, preschool, child care, paediatric care and ECD etc)
 - Centre-based programmes for children 1-2 years prior to entering Grade 1 which offer an expanded range of experiences and learning opportunities in a group setting. These are of value in their own right and also in promoting skills and attitudes - laying the foundations of language and social skills and enthusiasm for learning so vital for children to make good use of later learning opportunities in school and elsewhere.
- Ensure good links and continuity with primary schools. This may include:
 - Short-term programmes within ECD centres and parenting programmes to introduce children and their parents to some of the activities, skills and themes they will encounter in Grade 1.
 - Visits in the last period before children move on to their local primary school and grade 1 teacher visits to the ECD centres that 'feed' their local primary school
 - Re-orientation of ECD as a field so that it gives adequate attention to 6-8 year-olds as a group within its purview.
- Target the disadvantaged
 - Focus efforts to ensure that the most disadvantaged children (who will benefit most)

- are reached
- Advocate policy reform (increased public expenditures, mandates on the private sector etc.) which will ensure services reach children in both the formal and informal sectors.
- In order to achieve greater coverage it is vital to
 - Make advocacy for ECD more effective
 - Provide local hard evidence and more accessible studies. This involves making better use of existing studies, presenting them in appropriate formats that relate specifically to the interests of the particular group, e.g. the interest of many education policy-makers is likely to be captured by benefits to the system and increases in efficiency.
 - Use the growing body of evidence from developing nations which demonstrates the cost-effectiveness of interventions targeted at disadvantaged groups (Boocock and Lerner, 1998). Highlight ECD's efficacy in reducing the social and economic disparities and gender inequalities that divide societies and perpetuate poverty, and the importance of channelling public resources to ECD interventions that can stop the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Birdsall 1999, Co-ordinators' Notebook, 2004).
 - Increase understanding of ECD's significance as a frontline strategy for achieving EFA goals and MDGs. Explore where ECD can be incorporated into Fast Track Initiative planning and financing.
 - Work with broad-based poverty reduction programmes to increase understanding of ECD's significance in the fight against poverty and to ensure that more account is taken of the impact of these programmes on young children.

BETTER LINKAGES BETWEEN HOME – ECD – PRIMARY

While adequate investment in ECD programmes may be highly uneven across countries and regions the arguments are well known. Much less discussed is the need for serious attention to the early years of primary schooling as a critical period where systems are badly failing children. Too many primary schools do not know what, if any, ECD services are available in the wider community and therefore have inadequate links with them. Moreover, while community ECD programmes tend to have strong parental involvement, this does not carry through to primary. Engagement with parents is too often cursory (annual parent meetings rather than regular exchanges between teachers and parents regarding the social interactions and learning progress of their children). Where early childhood development programmes interact regularly with primary schools they can have a powerful positive influence on the opportunities for learning, discovery and participation that children are offered in primary schools.

Actions needed:

- Deliberately link ECD and early primary components - so that children are ready for school, and equally important, schools are ready for children.
- Conceptualize and implement services so that the emphasis is on continuity of methods and developmentally appropriate practice from infancy through the early years of primary. Attention to the vital and neglected transition period should be planned for as a whole rather than only within ECD or within primary. Concrete actions could include
 - Regular joint meetings as well as training for and reflection amongst ECD and Grade 1-2 teachers to exchange ideas, share materials and ensure a local “early years peer support group”
 - Involvement of both groups in curriculum development and use of appropriate methods and approaches. This should include specific initiatives where children's home language is different than the medium of instruction
 - Provision in Grades 1 and 2 of similar learning materials to those commonly found in ECD programmes: e.g. manipulatives, story books, etc. – and adapted according to children's developmental levels
 - Regular parent/community meetings – particularly for those parents whose children have not been in any organised ECD programme to discuss children's progress and

- provide ideas for how parents can further support their children’s learning at home
 - Readiness programmes, e.g. short summer sessions for children entering Grade 1, tutorials etc.
- Collaborate and establish needed links and services with the health sector to ensure children are fully immunized and their growth monitored, births are registered, school-level health education and feeding programmes for those in ECD and primary programmes are established where needed, etc.
- Provide adequate ECD provision in school catchment areas thereby:
- Reducing the number of under-age children in Grade 1 and reduce failure and repetition. By eliminating both underage children and most repetition, Grade 1 sizes could be halved in many countries.

BETTER SUPPORTS TO THE EARLY GRADES OF PRIMARY WITHIN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMMES

In practice the percentage of children enrolled in ECD programmes is still small. Moreover, most of those who are enrolled are unlikely to come from the most disadvantaged segments of society. This makes it all the more urgent to ensure that the overall quality of the first years of primary school is improved - drawing upon the substantial knowledge and experience available regarding how best to support young children’s learning and overall development (Abadzi, 2006).

Actions needed

- Bring about a shift in traditional ways of thinking about school improvement at all levels - school management, district education authorities, Education Ministry officials, donor agencies, and international and national NGOs so that broad-based School Improvement Programmes incorporate ways to particularly address issues in the first years of primary education. Ensure such thinking is embedded in National Plans and Strategies, Fast Track Initiatives (FTIs), etc.
- Prioritize attention and resources to the early years of primary (the opposite of what happens at present) to ensure
 - Smaller classes e.g. 35 rather than the 75+ often found
 - A welcoming, appreciative and inclusive environment with no bullying, corporal punishment or humiliation – by adults and amongst students
 - Experienced capable teachers in lower grades
 - More active learning opportunities and structured teaching methods bringing a clear, ordered approach to learning new tasks (clear explanations, regular checking for understanding, time for children to practice new skills etc.)
 - Stronger emphasis on building language skills and reading abilities including across other subject areas
 - Use of mother tongue for teaching basic concepts and reading; bi-lingual classes
 - Books children can take home as well as use in class particularly those that build on local culture, stories, songs and poems
 - An array of learning materials – that are low-cost/ no-cost but of high relevance and not just textbooks – to establish basic concepts e.g. seeds and containers to assist internalization of number values, seriation; etc; and specially developed Grade 1 kits that may be portable and can be easily updated and renewed over time
- Teacher Training, supports and incentives: Building teacher morale, commitment and skills is central to achieving the above improvements. The following are possible options:
 - Build and deepen early grade teachers understanding of how young children learn, in particular strengthen their skills in fostering early literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in both pre-service and in-service training. This may require considerable re-tooling of those involved in teacher education, not least because there may be an inadequate representation of teacher trainers who themselves have early years education experience.
 - Support teachers in practical ways to help children learn and enjoy learning. Enable teachers to introduce more active learning strategies directly linked to existing textbooks and ensuring children meet curriculum learning objectives. (This is important as resistance to new methods is usually linked to a sense that these are an “add-on” rather than something which will assist the teacher ensure that children

- o actually learn what she is trying to teach!)
- o Give effective and regular follow-up support and mentoring to teachers in classrooms – appreciation, encouragement plus clear, simple and doable advice.
- o Enable exchange between early grade teachers to learn from/support one another.
- o In areas where multi-grade/multi-age teaching is offered, use the opportunity to have children grouped according to skills/abilities during selected small group activities while also encouraging peer collaboration and support within ‘mixed’ groups at other times – including by older students e.g. reading stories to grade 1 students.
- o Provide specific professional development to those who supervise and oversee early grade teachers (school heads, SMCs, district education supervisors/inspectors)

IMPROVED EFFORTS TO INVOLVE PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS AT ALL STAGES

“When parents are involved in their children’s education at home, their children do better in school. When parents are involved at school their children go further in school, and the schools they go to are better” (Henderson and Berla, 1994).

Actions needed

- Capitalize on and learn from ECD programmes’ effectiveness in building parents’ and caregivers’ engagement with education – in terms of both their interest in and support for their children’s development and learning and their willingness to engage with education institutions (both supporting them and holding them to account)
- Increase parental and community engagement with schools through:
 - o Providing a welcoming environment for parents to come and discuss their children’s progress and other matters of concern - through an informal open door policy, specific open days, parent/ teacher meetings, social events etc.
 - o Encouraging involvement of parents from all different socio-economic groups in School Management Committees, and ensure transparency and open communication regarding the school budget and expenditures, teacher recruitment etc.
 - o Involving parents in school self-assessments, school improvement planning and building consensus on key ‘quality’ indicators for the local school that will better enable all girls’ and boys’ enrolment, retention and success in school
 - o Supporting the involvement of the community in collecting and managing information e.g. on out-of -school children, attendance etc.

IMPROVED INFORMATION

Improved information and analysis is needed to enable us to learn from both successes and failures and take appropriate action at all levels – from the individual school to international policy-makers. There have been some key pieces missing in the way education data analysis has been designed.

Actions needed:

- Systematically include data and analysis on drop-out and repetition by grade as well as overall drop-out for end primary. Show Grade 1 drop-out as % of overall primary drop-out. Ensure this is part of key reports at national and international levels, including all future EFA monitoring reports, MDG progress reports or FTIs.
- Assist schools to extract this sort of key information (and also learning achievement data) from standard forms which they are required to complete for the Education department. Enable schools to then review the information regularly, plan accordingly and track changes within the school.
- In addition to strengthening routine school record-keeping, supplement this with qualitative studies of change within the schools and, where relevant, in the community e.g. parents/students perceptions of schools and demand for education.
- Continue economic analyses of ECD in terms of ECD programmes efficacy in improving school achievement and future earnings. Also give attention to other important impacts directly relevant to poverty reduction. Document and convey the ways that effective ECD programmes build caregivers’ and communities’ sense of agency to act on their own behalf and on behalf of their children. Investigate more whether ECD is one of the key sparks in the “capacity to

aspire” (Appadurai, 2004).

- Investigate what happens as ECD expands and is absorbed into the formal system, particularly in majority world countries. There are obvious positives in terms of coverage, financing and sustainability. However, it is critical to understand as well questions such as: How are ECD policies being developed, implemented and monitored? What can we learn from other relevant countries on what processes work or not? Where has the impetus come from for new policies? What are the impacts for children? What are the implications for programme quality? Is it proving a tremendous opportunity to push up child-centred active learning methods into primary or is it a downward extension of primary? What happens to family and community engagement and ownership? Are there sufficient government, NGO and/or private ECD institutions with the technical and leadership capacities to provide the necessary human resources needed at all levels?

Much of what we have been discussing throughout this article is directly concerned with improving the quality of learning opportunities available to children so that they are more likely to enter, stay in and gain from education. Defining quality is not easy, but at its centre is the relationship between learners and teachers. Whether we are talking about children’s first and most influential teachers (their parents), early childhood programme staff or primary school teachers it is the quality of their interaction with the children in their care which is at the heart of our concern.

ANNEX ONE: EARLY DROP-OUT AND REPETITION AGAINST OVERALL PRIMARY AND GROSS ENROLLMENT AT PREPRIMARY FOR SELECTED COUNTRIES (2000)

	Dropout Grade 1	Dropout Grade 2	Overall Dropout Primary	Repetition Grade 1	Repetition Grade 2	Overall Repetition	Gross Enrollment in PrePrimary
Armenia	2.6	1.7	4.3	---	0.1	0.1	30.5
Columbia	18.9	7.6	39.1	11.5	6.2	6.6	34.8
Cook Islands	36.2	4.3	53.1	5.1	0.5	2.6	85.9
Ecuador	12.5	3.6	23.8	4.0	2.8	2.1	63.6
Egypt	0.7**	0.2**	1.1**	-	3.6**	5.1**	12.8
Equatorial Guinea	23.3**	3.1**	67.4**	48.1	40.2	40.5	30.2
Ethiopia	16.6	8.9	44.4	17.3	7.9	8.1	1.5
Georgia	2.4	2.3	6.2	0.3	0.3	0.3	41.0
Guatemala	13.9	9.8		27.0	14.5	14.2	37.3
India	20.3	10.1	38.6	3.5	2.7	3.7	19.5
Lao PRD	12.9	7.1	37.7	35.7	20.6	20.0	7.6
Lebanon	1.4	0.8	9.2	4.9	6.2	8.7	73.9
Lesotho	14.7	1.3	45.6	23.3	28.5	19.7	23.4
Malawi	20.5	6.1	59.1	19.0	17.2	14.4	-
Morocco	3.7	3.6**	22.2**	17.1	13.5**	12.6	59.7
Nepal	10.2	1.2	22.2	39.9	17.1	21.6	12.1
Philippines	12.5	3.2	24.7	5.2	2.7	2.3	33.0
South Africa	19.7	6.9	42.6	8.4	7.3	8.8	24.2
Syria	1.3	1.0	11.7	13.8	9.2	6.8	9.8
Yemen	9.2**	3.4**	15.5**	5.6**	6.1**	9.0	0.40**

Source: EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005

** UIS Estimates.

Regional Statistics

	Dropout Grade 1	Dropout Grade 2	Overall Dropout Primary	Repetition Grade 1	Repetition Grade 2	Overall Repetition	Gross Enrollment in PrePrimary
World	4.0	2.3	13.6	6.5	5.4	5.6	48.1
Arab States	1.9	0.8	7.9	6.8	6.2	7.7	19.7
Central Asia	2.5	1.8	5.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	22.4
Latin America and Caribbean	5.8	3.0	19.1	10.0	6.2	6.2	67.4
South and West Asia	8.3	2.3	22.2	7.2	5.6	5.3	25.8
Sub Saharan Africa	10.5	4.6	42.1	22.2	19.2	19.5	6.0

Source: EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005

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