

WORKING PAPERS IN

Early Childhood Development

41

Is everybody ready?

*Readiness, transition and continuity:
Reflections and moving forward*

by Caroline Arnold, Kathy Bartlett,
Saima Gowani and Rehana Merali



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About the paper

This working paper considers ways to tackle the critical issue of early drop-out and under-achievement of children at school. It draws on evidence of the benefits of early childhood programmes to children's learning and success in school. It particularly examines how well-designed early childhood programmes can effectively address poverty and exclusion. The paper also looks at how to aid the transition to school from either home or an early childhood programme. The connection between the first goal of UNESCO's Education for All initiative (early childhood care and education) and the attainment of other goals has not received adequate attention at any level. This paper seeks to redress that.

The paper's concern goes beyond what happens to children before they enter school. It also asks why, despite the internationally accepted definition of early years as ages 0–8, do early childhood professionals and policy-makers almost always ignore 6–8-year-olds and consider early childhood development as pertaining only to the pre-school years? And what basics are needed in large-scale school improvement programmes to ensure a welcoming and nurturing environment and to sustain good practices and learning during those vital early years of formal school? Finally, it explores how we can conceptualise and implement work differently to better integrate early childhood development and early primary education.

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March 2007

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

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Citation

Arnold, C., Bartlett, K., Gowani, S., Merali, R. 2007. Is everybody ready? Readiness, transition and continuity: Reflections and moving forward. Working Paper 41. Bernard van Leer Foundation: The Hague, The Netherlands

This paper is based on a background paper prepared by the authors for UNESCO's *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007. Strong foundations: early childhood care and education*. ISBN 978-92-3-104041-2. The original paper is available in PDF format at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001474/147441e.pdf>.

ISSN 1383-7907

ISBN 978-90-6195-095-0

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Acronyms

AKDN	<i>Aga Khan Development Network</i>
AKF	<i>Aga Khan Foundation</i>
BEECE	<i>Basic Education and Early Childhood Education, Jamaica</i>
CGECCD	<i>Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development</i>
CIS	<i>Commonwealth of Independent States</i>
ECD	<i>early childhood development</i>
EFA	<i>education for all</i>
EPPE	<i>Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project, UK</i>
FTIs	<i>fast track initiatives</i>
GMR	<i>Global Monitoring Report</i>
MDGs	<i>Millennium Development Goals</i>
MICS2	<i>Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys End Decade Assessment</i>
MRC	<i>Madrasa Resource Centre</i>
NGO	<i>non-governmental organisation</i>
OECD	<i>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</i>
RCC	<i>Releasing Confidence and Creativity, Pakistan</i>
SACMEQ	<i>Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality</i>
UNESCO	<i>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</i>
UPE	<i>universal primary education</i>
UNICEF	<i>United Nations Children's Fund</i>
USAID	<i>United States Agency for International Development</i>

Introduction

Mohamed, age 8, idly draws patterns in the earth with a twig. Every so often he glances up for a quick check that the sheep haven't wandered too far. Last year he was in school but there were 97 children in his class and he never could see the board. His parents didn't have enough money to buy textbooks, and the ones supplied free by the Ministry of Education arrived in the last quarter of the school year; in any case they ran out before Mohamed could get one. This year he will not be returning to school.

Maria helps her mother wash the dishes. She will spend most of the day looking after her brother who, at age 4, is just two years younger. Like Mohamed, Maria too was in school last year. The radio ran continuous announcements urging all parents to send their children to school and explaining that school was free. Maria 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. Maria failed two of the exams at the end of Grade 1 and the teacher said she would have to repeat the year. Maria wanted to go back but her parents decided it was a waste of time.

There are millions of Mohameds and Marias. With the big push for universal primary education (UPE), a large and unprecedented number of children now enrol in school. But that is where the good news ends. Few stay in school. And this despite knowing full well the critical importance of completing at least a

basic education. It is this awareness that led to the emphasis on completion of primary school – and not just enrolment – in the Dakar education for all (EFA) commitments (2000) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). What has not been critically examined so far is where efforts to ensure completion are breaking down, that is, at what point children are leaving primary school, and why.

The 2005 Global Monitoring Report (GMR) published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) indicates that every year, 88 million children drop out of primary school. What is even more worrying is that most of these children leave – or are pushed out of – school within the first year or two. According to the report, the number of Grade 1 drop-outs was twice as high as the number for any other primary school grade. In many countries, high Grade 1 drop-out rates combine with even worse repetition rates, as illustrated in Nepal and Uganda, where about half the Grade 1 children either drop out or repeat.

In countries that have introduced automatic promotion, the repetition problem has been resolved. But this is a recent development. Moreover, it does not mean that teachers have become more responsive to individual needs, or that children with specific difficulties get additional support. It simply means that children move up every year. But is this the

answer? It has been observed that in these circumstances, even as they stay in school, many children acquire – and nurture – negative persistent patterns such as under-achievement, or low enthusiasm for learning, since they simply move up the scale with whatever problems they may be encountering in school. Not surprisingly, in such situations a decrease in repetition is accompanied by a higher drop-out rate.

In East Africa for example, determined national efforts towards free UPE have resulted in massive enrolment. Grade 1 class sizes have ballooned to more than a hundred children aged between 4 and 12, or even older. A scan through Ministry of Education statistics for Uganda just prior to and after the introduction of UPE reveals how little completion rates have changed despite UPE. While Grade 1 enrolments have increased massively, there is a dramatic reduction by Grade 2. This negative trend continues right through primary school, with only half of pupils completing the primary cycle. Uganda's drop-out rates increased steadily between 2001 and 2005. Following the introduction of UPE, 10 times more students repeated Grade 1 (UNESCO, 2005). Clearly, free education alone has failed to resolve the problems of access and retention since so many learners leave, probably never to return – disillusioned by overcrowding, lack of desks and learning materials and, most crucially, lack of a trained and interested teacher.

This paper considers ways to tackle the critical issue of early drop-out and under-achievement. It draws on evidence of the benefits of early childhood programmes to children's learning

and success in school. It particularly examines how well-designed early childhood programmes can effectively address poverty and exclusion. The paper also looks at how to aid the transition to school from either home or an early childhood programme. The connection between EFA's first goal (early childhood care and education) and the attainment of other goals has not received adequate attention at any level. This paper seeks to redress that.

The paper's concern goes beyond what happens to children before they enter school. It also raises the following questions:

- Why, despite the internationally accepted definition of early years as ages 0–8, do early childhood professionals and policy-makers almost always ignore 6–8-year-olds and consider early childhood development (ECD) as pertaining only to the pre-school years?
- What basics are needed in large-scale school improvement programmes to ensure a welcoming and nurturing environment and to sustain good practices and learning during those vital early years of formal school?
- How can we conceptualise and implement work differently to better integrate ECD and early primary education?

Transition

In this paper, the term 'transition' describes the period of time before, during and after a child's move into primary school, either from home or from an early childhood programme. Starting primary school is a momentous experience for most children. Often it is stressful – nothing is

familiar, everything is bigger and there are lots of strangers. Exciting or terrifying, it is an indelible memory for most people. The paper examines how to make the transition a positive experience by pre-emptive action before the child goes to school, and once the child is in school.

Readiness

Readiness and transition are closely linked. For a smooth transition, children must be ready for school. Equally important, but only more recently acknowledged, schools too must be ready for the children. Also key to successful transition is parental readiness to be involved and supportive before and after children start school.

The next section examines children's readiness for school and how good support during the pre-school years greatly increases this. Later sections discuss the readiness of schools and systems for the children, as well as family and community roles. The variation in support (whether because of the situation at home or access to quality early childhood programmes) means that children will inevitably be at different levels of readiness to make the most of school. It then becomes the responsibility of schools to be ready for children: to offer them a supportive environment that enables them to blossom and learn effectively.

Chapter 1: Children and their readiness

Definitions of readiness

“Can she copy off the board? Can he count to 20?”

Earlier definitions of readiness focused on a set of pre-determined cognitive skills that a child should possess to qualify for Grade 1. This traditional construct of school readiness was criticised for its narrow focus (Ramey and Ramey, 1999). While widespread misconceptions still abound, the understanding of what ‘school readiness’ means has increased greatly in recent years. There is consensus, based on a wealth of research, that children’s readiness for school depends on their level in five distinct but interconnected domains:

- physical well-being and motor development
- social and emotional development
- approaches to learning
- language development
- cognition and general knowledge.

Most teachers agree with the above. They would like children to be healthy, confident, active and attentive; able to communicate their needs, feelings and thoughts; enthusiastic and curious about new class activities. Beyond attitude and well-being, equally important for them are skills such as the ability to follow directions, not being disruptive in class and being sensitive to others (Kids Count, 2005). 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, Africa and Latin America, where 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 their being polite, respectful, obedient and friendly and, at the same time, confident, curious and comfortable even with strangers. They appear to combine traits that have traditionally been emphasised for children within the culture with those that are critical for operating in today’s dynamic world.

Factors affecting child readiness

The early years are critical to the formation of intelligence, personality and social behaviour, as well as to physical development. There are multiple factors – at the level of the child and the wider environment – that influence a child’s overall development and readiness. International economic and political trends like globalisation, increasing marginalisation of social services, migration for work, ever increasing workloads for girls and women, armed conflicts and HIV/AIDS affect every aspect of young children’s lives.

Economic pressures are a fundamental concern for families with children. Whether with respect to families, communities or countries, lack of resources undermines their capacity to adequately provide for children. Poverty is compounded by fatigue and general frustration, which all take their toll on families.

Understandably, families often focus on feeding children. But when it comes to promoting the child's best interests, adults may feel they have little sense of agency or control. They may also feel powerless in the face of more immediate and more pressing needs. Many different studies show family poverty adversely affects children's health, intellectual capabilities, academic achievement and behaviour (Weitzman, 2003). Further, poverty during infancy and pre-school years is more damaging than poverty in later childhood (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997). Many poor children are denied the opportunity to go to school. Others enrol but are not ready to make the most of the opportunity. Consequently, they perform poorly or drop out in droves. This means they automatically enter the labour force on the lowest rungs, earning little. And when they become parents, they will pass on the oppressive poverty baton to their children.

Poverty means poor diets, resulting in poor behavioural and cognitive development in infants and children. Damage from severe malnutrition is difficult to reverse after the age of 3. Long-term deficits result in children and infants who are small-for-gestational-age, have

a low birthweight and who suffer from vitamin deficiencies and malnutrition. Malnourished children are less engaged, less active and have shorter attention spans than their well-nourished counterparts. Consequently, malnourished children score lower in school and have less emotional control. Lack of three micronutrients – iron, iodine and vitamin A – compromises growth and immunity and also impairs mental development and educational attainment.

Research over the last few decades demonstrates that the brain is almost fully developed by the time a child enters school. Interactions during the first few years substantially shape a child's neural pathways. Early experiences have a decisive influence on brain architecture and 'wiring', and therefore on the nature and extent of later capacities.

Language is the basic tool for thought, communication, reasoning and making sense of the world. Long before children learn to speak, their early interactions lay the foundation for language development. Children who live in poverty in their early years have, for the most part, significantly less verbal interaction and begin school with fewer linguistic skills than peers from higher income backgrounds (Pikulski and Templeton, 2004). Language levels at 3 years of age accurately predict those at age 10 (Hart and Riseley, 2003). Studies demonstrate that reading to pre-school children, books in the home and children's own direct experience with print are all facilitative precursors for language development, reading and success in school.

A caring and nurturing adult is paramount for a child's healthy growth and development. Nurturing caregiver–child relationships have universal features across cultures, regardless of differences in specific childcare practices. Sound caregiver–child relationships are typically characterised by children who are well-fed and kept safe, and by consistent affection, responsiveness, conversation, stimulation and opportunities to learn about their world. Many studies confirm that the quality of the home environment affects the child's development. This factor is often associated with socio-economic status, with poorer families providing a less stimulating environment for their child as reported in Jamaica's Profiles Project (Samms-Vaughan et al., 2004). However, it is important to avoid over-simplistic conclusions on the relationship between poverty and family capacity to support child development. Time and again, practices drawing creatively on minimal resources are found.

Socio-economic factors are a key influence, but the picture is complex. Results from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project in the UK have shown that the home learning environment can have a greater effect on child development than socio-economic status (Sylva et al., 2004).

Home learning environment is defined as activities that offer learning opportunities to the child – reading to children, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, painting

and drawing, having friends visit for play, and so on. Home learning was more strongly associated with children's intellectual and social development than either parental education or occupation. This finding emphasises that parents – rich or poor – can set their children off to a good start through home activities that foster learning. The authors 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 similar findings (Arnold et al., 2000). The study found many examples of ‘positive deviance’ – families from the most disadvantaged groups who provided learning opportunities by engaging their children in everyday activities and conversations. One mother, for example, on returning home from a long day's work, immediately engaged all 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, and so on, and took an interest in their responses. She also brought home four tiny crabs for the children to play with.

The same point – namely that the critical element is the way caring practices are performed – is strongly reinforced in a 2004 World Health Organization (WHO) publication entitled *The importance of*

caregiver-child interactions for the survival and healthy development of young children. Not surprisingly, research indicates that support and warmth from a caregiver results in greater social competence. School-age children have fewer behavioural issues and better thinking and reasoning skills. Strong and supportive caregiving relationships make children more resilient and also cushion them against the ravages of deprivation, poverty and violence. This is the strongest and clearest explanation as to why some children who grow up in materially wretched conditions are nonetheless healthy and productive at school and in society, and have good relationships.

ECD programmes and their effects

Quality ECD programmes maximise synergism between protection, good health and nutrition, supportive and affectionate interaction, stimulation, and opportunities for exploring the environment. The positive influences of such programmes are far-reaching for the child, family, community and wider society. Moreover, the benefits continue throughout the child's life. Investments in the early years offer outstanding social and financial returns. Studies from around the world demonstrate that children who participate in early childhood programmes do better in school, are healthier and, later as adults, are more economically productive, emotionally balanced and socially responsible. The value of ECD programmes, therefore, is not only in their response to the immediate needs of children and their families, but also in building children's ability to contribute, in future, to society.

A host of studies and evaluations demonstrate gains for children in early childhood programmes. The most persuasive of these compare children who have participated in such programmes with groups who have not. Many studies in both the minority and increasingly in the majority world have blended 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 illustrate some of the impacts of ECD on everyday life. For example, the stunning figures from one of the most famous ECD studies – the High/Scope Perry pre-school study that showed 84 percent of the programme girls finished high school versus 35 percent in the control group (Schweinhart et al., 1993). It also showed girls in the control group were twice as likely to be arrested. In fact, some of the early longitudinal studies in the USA and Europe which only focused on 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 continued (due to high levels of motivation).

Goal 1: Important in its own right and for the attainment of other goals

The first goal in the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) was the expansion of early childhood care and education programmes. The commitment was reaffirmed and EFA goals updated and re-stated at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. The first goal emphasised “expanding

and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children”. Early childhood needs to be seen as an important time in its own right, not just as a mere preparation for school or citizenship. Early childhood programmes are valuable in and of themselves. As de los Angeles-Bautista (2003) observes, early childhood programmes are “about addressing the child’s rights now and not for some future time”. The younger the child, the more he or she depends on adults to ensure rights. Indeed, ECD programmes are in essence concerned with children’s rights and, as such, with the very 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.

But by their very nature, early childhood development programmes also determine the foundations of a child’s future. The Framework for Action adopted at the Jomtien Conference in 1990 emphasised the critical importance of the early years for education: “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” (UNESCO, 1990).

It is important to recognise that many policy-makers (governments and donors) will need evidence of return on investment if they are to allocate resources for young children and their families. Has there been adequate analysis and

action on connecting EFA’s first goal with the attainment of other goals? This connection is particularly critical for goals targeting:

- access and completion of basic education
- by all (Goal 2) – with special attention to disadvantaged groups
- gender issues (Goal 5)
- better quality (Goal 6).

ECD programmes also have an impact on:

- education costs by reducing resource and cohort wastage
- parental involvement (known to be a robust indicator of a child’s likelihood to succeed in school).

These aspects are discussed in the sections that follow.

Improving school enrolment, retention, achievement and completion

In a setting where many children never go beyond the first few grades of school, basic indicators become very significant. School attendance, or lack of it, will have a powerful impact on a child’s future opportunities. Education ministries have to make tough choices on resource allocation. But they increasingly recognise that investment in ECD programmes is crucial in enhancing primary school enrolment and completion rates, for which they are held most accountable.

Mingat and Jaramillo (2003) analysed data from 133 countries, studying the correlation between pre-school enrolment and primary completion. They found completion rates of only 50 percent

in the absence of pre-school, and around 80 percent where half the children have access to some sort of pre-school or ECD centre. These findings could be interpreted as simply reflecting the fact that richer countries are more likely to have higher ECD enrolment rates as well as better completion rates. However, this is not the case since controlling for per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) makes very little difference.

The Nepal ECD impact study (Bartlett et al., 2003) is a good example of the sort of data of interest to governments. Conducted in a district with some of the worst education indicators in the country, the study examined critical numbers and trends in enrolment, pass rates, drop-out and repetition. The data were disaggregated for gender and caste. The results were startling. More than 95 percent of children who went through the ECD centres (which targeted disadvantaged families) went on to school as opposed to 75 percent of those who had not. The Grade 1 repetition rate for children from the ECD group was one seventh of that for non-programme participants. ECD children had a remarkably higher pass rate. Continued tracking found 80 percent of the cohort progressed through school with no failure or repetition. In four years, annual drop-out was only 1.2 percent – a tenth of the national figure. Projections indicate these children, compared with the average Nepali student, are more than twice as likely to complete primary school within five years.

Similarly in Peru, a recent study found that nearly 60 percent more poor children who

participated in pre-school programmes completed primary school, compared with poor children who did not access pre-school (Aldaz-Carroll, 1999). 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 who had gone through an early childhood programme (Chaturvedi et al., 1987). A study in East Africa (Uganda, Zanzibar and Kenya) tracked children who attended pre-school programmes and those who did not. Advantages of pre-school participation (determined by success in school) continued into primary school through the three grades that were tracked (Mwaura, 2005; Mwaura and Nyamweya, 2006).

The Turkish Early Enrichment Project (Kagitcbasi et al., 2001) was implemented in Istanbul's low-income, low-education areas. The study demonstrated the dramatic effects of ECD and mother training on school enrolment and retention for children in a poor urban area. Mothers were trained on how to cultivate a child's cognitive, social and personality development seven years after the programme, 86 percent of the children whose mothers had participated in the programme were still in school, compared with 67 percent of those whose mothers had not. Children who had been exposed to either type of intervention (mother training or pre-school programmes) exhibited higher school attainment, were more likely to attend university, began their working lives at a later age and had higher occupational status.

These and other 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. The variance is attributed mainly to differences in attitude and motivation. Children who have participated in ECD programmes are able to work independently, are more self-confident and have higher aspirations for their future. As Schweinhart et al. (1993) observe, ECD programmes seem to confer long-term gains through “engendering the dispositions in children that enable them to achieve greater success as they begin school. This early success triggers higher motivation, better performance and higher regard from teachers and classmates”. The resilience of ECD benefits, even when schooling is poor, is consistent with the understanding of the active role children play in their own learning.

This may explain why the Nepal study (Bartlett et al., 2003) – within a very different context – has strikingly similar findings to those of the Western studies. It attributes success to the direct gains in children’s confidence and learning, and the positive effects that this has on both parents and teachers when the children go to school. The children are perceived by their parents, teachers and fellow children as being self-assured, capable, articulate and highly motivated, as well as neat and clean, respectful and helpful. This key finding cuts across numerous studies and evaluations in East Africa and South Asia. Parents describe the increased interest they take in their children; teachers

appreciate their students as eager learners and sometimes enlist their help in assisting other children in the class.

The bottom line is this: **Where resources for quality learning experiences are limited, children benefit most from having those experiences early in life.**

Addressing discrimination and exclusion – critical to meeting EFA goals

Early childhood programmes are especially important in improving enrolment, retention and achievement for disadvantaged groups. Whatever the factors underlying exclusion or marginalisation – be it gender, poverty, ethnicity, caste, religion, disability or rural isolation – early childhood programmes are remarkably effective in countering disadvantage. The findings of studies examining ECD’s efficacy in addressing these issues are important. Important because it is the entrenched high drop-out rate for children from disadvantaged groups that constrains meeting key EFA commitments and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). **Evidence abounds worldwide that the most disadvantaged children experience the most dramatic gains from ECD.** Studies from USA (High/Scope-Perry; Abecedarian Study), UK (EPPE), Guinea and Cape Verde, India and Nepal, and Brazil and Colombia all confirm that ECD interventions give disadvantaged children an edge, compensating for the lack of unsupportive environment. In Brazil for example, grade completion rates surged from 2 percent to 40 percent as a result of a community-based ECD programme.

Children from better-off families are more likely to enjoy a home environment that is relatively conducive to healthy child development. Therefore, while ECD programmes provide useful supports for all children, the impact will be more impressive for the poorest: those who need it most get the most out of it. According to Kabiru and Hyde (2003), “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 counters the worst effects of poverty, it may also be the most effective way to break the relentless cycle of cross-generational poverty.

Gender equity

When examining the wide range of exclusion issues, EFA pays special attention to gender. ECD interventions can promote gender equity by compensating for gender biases in nutrition, healthcare, stimulation and education opportunities. When young girls participate in ECD programmes, their parents regard their daughters more positively and are more inclined to treat them more equitably – sending them to school, taking them for treatment when sick, etc. ECD programmes enable older girls to go to school: these girls are often childminders while parents work. A number of studies, including the High/Scope Perry preschool study, have indicated that the benefits of early childhood

programmes tend to be greatest for girls. In India and Guatemala for example, girls in ECD programmes are much more likely to join school at the right age. The Nepal study found that ECD programmes dramatically improved boy–girl ratios in primary school, 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 than girls who had 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 (for instance, parents read to them less). But they too benefited greatly from the ECD interventions, although not as much as girls.

Changing the system

The significance of ECD in countering exclusion is not limited to direct impacts on young children. Recognition is growing on the importance of ECD in helping change systems that marginalise certain children. Parenting programmes are shifting their approach. They not only seek to enhance parents’ direct efforts to provide for, protect, and support their children’s overall development, but also emphasise helping them hold others accountable. This includes providing parents with information and building their confidence and sense of agency to act on their own behalf and on behalf of their children. For example, if

parents know their district has been allocated a certain number of ECD centres, they can lobby for one in their village. Such approaches strengthen families and communities to cope with difficult situations that lead to, and also emerge from, poverty.

As the Turkish study concludes: “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” (Kagitcibasi et al., 2001). The process, which involves not only home visits but also bi-weekly group discussions, transforms the developmental outcomes for the child as well as the context in which the child is raised, through the benefits of mother training which boosts her confidence, communication skills, relations with the family and her status in the family. “Thus at the end of the intervention children are not left in the same old context, but in a context which has also changed and can provide them with continued support.”

There have been similar findings in Pakistan, Nepal, India, Colombia, Zanzibar and Kenya. The parents of the children who have participated in ECD are accustomed to playing an active role in these programmes. As the child moves to Grade 1 and on through school, the parents are more likely to talk to teachers, show interest in their children’s progress, engage with the School Management Committee, raise issues that concern them and even hold teachers and administrators to account. This increased

willingness of parents who have been involved with ECD programmes to engage with the formal school system is an unanticipated but highly significant outcome, given that parental involvement is one of the most robust predictors of a child’s success or failure in school.

“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).

Return on investment...

Analysis of the evidence demonstrates the economic and social efficacy of investments in early childhood. Research shows that well-targeted, high-quality early childhood interventions can yield very high economic returns. **The returns can almost double if programmes target children most at risk, who have the lowest social indicators.** This is because, as previously discussed, reductions in school drop-out and repetition are much greater for children from poor families than for children from better-off families. Targeting ECD to children most at risk has a very sound economic rationale. In terms of economic rate of return to investment, ECD programmes outstrip investments in the so-called ‘hard’ sectors such as infrastructure, which are often less than 2:1. The High/Scope Perry pre-school study for instance had a return on investment of 7:1 – for every dollar spent, there were seven dollars saved.

Schweinhart et al. (1993) included a range of items such as savings for the criminal justice system, savings through fewer welfare payments and less need for special education programmes. They also took into account the difference in earnings between the two groups. Most benefit-to-cost analyses have not had the advantage of such rich databases and have looked at a much narrower range of benefits specifically related to children's years in school and their projected future earnings. Studies by the World Bank and other agencies in Bolivia, Colombia and Egypt have tended to estimate returns on ECD programming at approximately 3:1.

As World Bank economists Van der Gaag and Tan (1998) state: "Societies cannot prosper if their children suffer. ECD programmes are a sound investment in the well-being of children and the future of societies. By breaking the inter-generational cycle of deprivation, ECD programmes are a powerful tool for obtaining the ultimate objective of development to give all people a chance to live productive and fulfilling lives."

Indeed, it is possible and important to draw reasonable conclusions about worthwhile investments without the advantage of detailed benefit-to-cost analyses. Brazil's 'Atencao a Crianca' programme, for example, points out that a child in pre-school 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). Initial investments in young children are far less costly than programmes to remedy deficits from early years.

Building prisons to house troubled youths and adults financed by cutting health and education budgets is inefficient. Doryan et al. (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 analyses to see that ECD investments makes sense.

...but continued under-investment

Despite improvements, services for young children have much less support than is 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 whose children are least likely to access early childhood programmes. In the populous, low-income E-9 countries, despite efforts to increase pre-school participation, enrolments are in some instances still low. For example, the good progress made in Mexico (76 percent) and China (40 percent) contrasts sharply with that of Egypt (6 percent), Pakistan (17 percent), Nigeria (18 percent), Indonesia (19 percent), India (20 percent), and Brazil and Bangladesh (25 percent) (UNESCO, 2003b). And in sub-Saharan Africa, participation rates still often fall below 5 percent. Many countries have made considerable strides in improving access to primary education. However, the lack of supports for young children's development means that children cannot fully benefit from the opportunity. Moreover, programmes fail to reach the most disadvantaged children who

should be their key target. Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys End Decade Assessment (MICS2) studies in 48 countries found marked inequities due to income levels, maternal education and the rural–urban divide (UNICEF, 2002).

Thus, where children have access to ECD programmes, it has been observed that there are extensive benefits to them, their families and wider society. ECD programmes help to create children ‘ready’ for school and the world beyond. The question is: Are schools ready for children?

Chapter 2: Schools and their readiness

Narrow academic definitions of children's readiness for school have given way to broader ones which emphasise the importance of not only cognitive competencies but also physical, social, emotional and motivational factors. Similarly, the way society looks at schools is changing. Schools are recognised as significant personal and social environments for learners. Quality education is increasingly accepted as going beyond academic learning, encompassing children's social development, their emotional and physical well-being and protection from harm.

Child-friendly schools and other similar initiatives are some of the best-known expressions of 'ready schools'. Regardless of terminology, quality school programmes have several common strands. The tenet of keeping the best interests of the child at the centre results in 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 and critical thinking;
- good learning outcomes.

Relevance

- education based on the reality of children's lives, and the strong connections between home, community and school, which influence and inform

- curriculum
- language of instruction
- flexible school calendar
- strong community involvement in school management committees
- parental involvement in school life.

Active promotion of equality, respect and inclusion in a supportive, nurturing, safe and healthy learning environment

- teachers' and children's behaviour: welcoming atmosphere, respect for each other's rights, dignity, diversity and equality. No discrimination with regard to gender, ethnicity, religion, economic status or ability. On the contrary, active challenging of stereotyping and exclusion;
- materials and lesson content
- regulated conduct – no bullying, physical punishment, abuse or humiliation
- healthy physical environment: hygienic and safe, with adequate water and toilets.

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, it is 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.

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. How young girls and boys fare, how they feel in the early days and weeks, how they are viewed and treated as learners – these factors are absolutely critical. It can be a time scarred by stress, anxiety and insecurity; or it can be a joyous time coloured by anticipation, new friends and challenges, creativity, enjoyment of learning and confidence. Opportunities for both are present in classrooms everywhere.

The crisis in the first year of school

Early drop-out and repetition

In far too many classrooms, the story is unfortunately an unhappy one. There is a major crisis during the initial years of primary education in 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 (such as overcrowded classrooms, very high teacher–child ratios and lack of learning materials).

According to UNESCO's 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. For the 63 countries whose drop-out rates by grade were available, Grade 1 rates were at least double those for Grade 2. In South Asia, Grade 1 children are three times more likely to drop out than children in Grade 4.

While most of Latin America has made considerable progress towards EFA goals, the situation remains bleak in pockets. In Colombia, 19 percent drop out before completing Grade 1. In Brazil, 31 percent repeat first grade. In Belize, children are 60 times more likely to drop out in Grade 1 than in Grade 2.

National figures mask disparities within countries. For instance, the national Grade 1 drop-out rate in India was 12 percent for the 2003 – 2004 cohort. Yet in the State of Rajasthan, drop-out rates were almost double at 21 percent, whereas Kerala State had only 2 percent. Similarly, repetition rates in Grade 1 for the two states were 20.3 percent and 0.3 percent respectively (Mehta, 2005).

Completion of primary education is a core milestone. It affects later productivity, HIV/AIDS prevalence (especially among girls), family size and the quality of childcare (Bruns et al., 2003; UNESCO Global Monitoring Report, 2003). Unfortunately, the focus on completion may be hindering attention to the heart of the problem – the fact that it is during the first year or two when the vast majority of those who do not complete actually drop out; the fact that so many millions of children have no chance of establishing even basic literacy and numeracy

Table 1. Drop-out and repetition rates for selected countries (percentage)

	Dropout Grade 1	Dropout Grade 2	Overall drop- out 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: UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2005

* UNESCO Institute For Statistics (UIS) estimates

because they spend such a short time in school. All these critical statistics are lost in the forest of global figures on enrolment and completion.

Inefficiencies in primary education – the long, winding road to completion

In many developing countries, it takes an average of 1.4 years to complete a grade. In rural Latin America, two out of every five children fail to finish primary school and students repeat at least two years of school in basic education (UNESCO, 2005). In Uganda, approximately 50 percent of primary students complete primary education — but the on-time completion rate is only 3 percent (Uganda Bureau of Statistics and ORC Macro, 2002; Cameron, 2005). In Cambodia, government data reveal some of the

highest inefficiencies (Cambodia Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 1999). On average, a student takes more than 14 years to complete the six-year primary cycle.

Poor learning

Of those who do complete primary school, few have sufficient literacy and problem-solving skills (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 income. Surveys in Peru and Romania, for example, demonstrate that more than half of school graduates are functionally

illiterate (Nielsen, 2005). And according to McGuiness (2004), 43 percent of 9-year-olds in the USA (who will already be in at least their fourth year of education) are functionally illiterate. In Honduras nine out of 10 sixth-graders performed at ‘low’ or ‘insufficient’ levels in mathematics and language assessments (Honduras Ministry of Education, 2002 in UNESCO’s GMR 2005). The situation is similar in African countries. In Malawi only 1 percent and in Zambia 2 percent of students achieve acceptable levels of proficiency by the end of Grade 6, as reported by the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) (UNESCO GMR, 2005).

The ability to read and comprehend what one reads is essential for learning in other subject areas. Ensuring that children are competent readers is a key area in which schools are abysmally failing children. A recent study (Pratham, 2005) across 485 districts in India tested skills in reading and mathematics. The results are sobering: more than one third of school-going 7–14-year-olds could not read simple paragraphs at Grade 1. There were similar problems with mathematics. As the study authors emphasise, “The foundations of our children’s basic reading and arithmetic need to be strengthened in the early grades in school. A strong beginning is essential for elementary education.” Abadzi (2006) points out that the failure to establish basic literacy and numeracy skills in the first year or two of school “creates inefficiencies that reverberate all through the system”.

Why are schools so weak in teaching disadvantaged children to read? Schiefelbein (1991) attributes this in part to the much smaller vocabularies that poor children have when they enter school, and to their lack of exposure to print or opportunities to enjoy books at home. The skills needed to teach a child with a 600-word vocabulary are vastly different from those needed to teach a child with a 3000-word vocabulary. But as Abadzi observes, no one is even sure what interventions are appropriate to overcome poor learning since little information exists on performance in lower grades. Standardised achievement tests (the results of which are so often disappointing) are usually given to students in Grades 4–6 when it is certain they can respond.

A pilot study on the teaching of initial reading in an Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) school improvement programme in Uganda offers further insights (Rwanyonga et al., 2005). The review found that batches of books, lent to schools on a rotating basis to promote an enhanced literacy ‘climate’, were not being used effectively. Reading lessons were scheduled but rarely taught. Reading was seen as a means of keeping children busy while their teacher was absent – not as a critical skill underpinning learning and understanding, and certainly not for pleasure or leisure. Teachers were themselves not confident teaching children how to read. But there is light at the end of the tunnel. One intervention introduced phonics methods using a multi-sensory approach, reflection workshops, regular guidance for Grades 1 and 2 teachers

and visits to observe successful approaches in neighbouring schools. Teachers gained skills and confidence in teaching reading and recognised its importance for all subjects. Children's reading improved. Broader studies in resource-poor environments are needed to improve our understanding of what works in different contexts.

Costs of inefficiency

Inefficiencies substantially reduce system capacity to provide education for all. Students who repeat take up classroom space, teachers' time, textbooks and other scarce financial and human resources that could be devoted to other students and to bringing yet more into school. In developing nations, the average combined drop-out and repetition rate is about 30 percent. And as statistics show, the majority drop out in Grades 1 or 2. Education systems are thus extremely inefficient and the financial implications are colossal and far-reaching. In Uruguay, Grade 1 repetition rates in 2004 were about 19 percent. For repeaters alone, the education system would need to hire an additional 1100 teachers. Salaries for these extra teachers are estimated at \$3.9 million annually. If repetition in the first two grades was reduced to 10 percent, this would result in savings of approximately \$1.6 million (Independent Evaluation Group, 2006).

In Cambodia (cited above) where students average more than 14 years to complete the primary cycle, the Asian Development Bank estimates that an additional 10,000 teachers

and 5000 more classrooms – representing a 20 percent increase in education resources – are needed in order for repeaters to finish school. Those who support children's education (government and families) must pay the economic and opportunity costs of additional years in the system. Seventy-five percent of the total cost of repetition (\$40 million) is calculated as 'household contribution'. As children grow older, the economic value of their labour increases. Thus, the opportunity costs to families for education are greatly increased and are a significant disincentive.

The social implications of inefficiency are borne by both the individual and the society. Children who drop out or continually repeat classes grow into adults with limited opportunities. This reduces a community's economic competitiveness, as well as the likelihood of catalysing community development. Urban children are more vulnerable to child labour, organised gangs and problems arising from delinquency and crime (UNESCO, 1998). These consequences are a tragedy of wastage for education systems as well as for the individuals and communities involved.

Factors affecting schools' readiness for children

Numerous studies and reports have clearly identified and outlined the factors working against both educational access and learning achievement. But further discussion is needed on how these factors come together in specific

and debilitating ways as children enter primary school. Major problems include:

- exclusion: the gap between families and schools, parents' low levels of involvement with, and confidence in, schools (related to language, culture and other factors)
- 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 teacher confidence and commitment and lack of professional development supports)
- poor record-keeping, resulting in inadequate or inaccurate information.

These problems work in tandem to create a cycle of failure in which lower classes become progressively more overcrowded, teachers more demoralised, parents and children disinterested and programmes unable to learn from failures or even from successes.

The challenges of change, a tracer study of San pre-school children in Botswana (Le Roux, 2002), reached conclusions equally applicable to many settings beyond the study area. The language gap was a major disincentive, strongly discouraging children from staying in school. Corporal punishment was the single most direct reason for children abandoning school. Animosity and tension arose from children comparing the formal school with their pre-school experience. A serious lack of cultural understanding between parents and teachers prevailed. The education system was poorly adapted to the reality of San children and the

routine in school interfered with the children's traditional eating habits.

Trust in local schools

Lack of familiarity with teachers posted to schools through a centralised system and mistrust of local schools are well-documented as critical factors influencing parents' views of education – most particularly for their daughters (Department for International Development, 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 are different from the teacher's, there could be misunderstandings that escalate the drop-out rate (some might say 'push-out' rate). Teacher absenteeism, rampant in some places, undermines trust and confidence from parents and students. The formal education system is often threatening, not just to the child, but to parents who themselves haven't attended school (AKE, 2006). Engagement with parents is often too cursory. Unfortunately, 'parent involvement' is most often reduced to annual meetings with parents or demands for contributions, rather than regular exchanges between teachers and parents on the social interactions and learning progress of their children. Policies may or may not allow for flexibility in the school calendar or daily timetable to accommodate the realities of the local context and family needs, such as harvest time or monsoon (Psacharopoulos et al., 2006). Flexibility is particularly critical in the early years, when core literacy and language skills are developing.

Sometimes circumstances conspire against enrolment. Many education systems require birth registration documents for enrolment. While birth registration is rightly championed to help ensure children's rights, it can be a double-edged sword, particularly where the process is hampered by confusing bureaucratic procedures, and conducted in the official language. Where parents have to walk long distances, or pay for transport and sometimes the document as well, the process is time-consuming and expensive. In such adverse circumstances, the attitude taken by the school is critical.

Language of instruction

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 often learn in three or four languages – Chichewa (Malawi's national language), English (the language of instruction materials), the teacher's first language and the students' first language (Chilora, 2000; Chilora and Harris, 2001). Not surprisingly, students whose first language was the same as the teacher's, even if the language of instruction was different, performed significantly better in primary school.

The developmental window of opportunity for rapid language learning closes at about the time children enter school. Initial competent communication and fluent reading skills are much easier to accomplish using the child's first language, given the wider vocabulary and

familiarity. Bilingual programmes (official or unofficial) can be important. This is more difficult, and often impossible, when the learners have different first languages. The importance of language of instruction is recognised in numerous studies (Abadzi, 2006; Benson, 2005) as well as in an increasing number of government policy documents and national plans. However, the squeeze on education budgets means that although many projects develop learning resources in minority languages, few filter to classroom teachers and children. The hard fact is that, even as knowledge and experience accumulate and are documented, practices on the ground may not change.

Class size, teacher–child ratios and learning materials for children

Grades 1 and 2 are notoriously overcrowded and oversubscribed. While the mixed effects of large class sizes on student achievement are debatable, 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 both teaching and learning capacities. Class sizes of 75 to 100 or even more children in Grade 1 greatly hamper instilling foundation skills and competencies critical for later learning and success.

Classroom sizes have increased in countries pursuing the important goal of free universal primary education – for instance in East Africa. Immediately following implementation of UPE, class sizes ballooned in early grades, often to extraordinary levels (150+ in Kenya, 120+ in Uganda). In such circumstances, otherwise

effective learning activities have to yield to class control and crowd management. Teachers, space, learning materials and sanitation facilities are all in short supply.

In Grades 1 and 2, teacher–child ratios are often so high that a quality learning environment is simply unattainable. The response in many places has been to introduce double and sometimes triple shifts resulting in ever shrinking teacher–learner contact hours. Children have limited or no access to materials – particularly to storybooks and teaching aids for developing numeracy and problem-solving skills. It is difficult to learn to read without books, and even harder to establish basic language and mathematical concepts without the necessary teaching aids.

Policies that foreground learning opportunities are needed, as well as 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 language and literacy.

Teacher quality

Generally, Grade 1 teachers tend to be viewed as less important than those teaching higher grades. They are therefore unlikely to have had specialised training to help them organise, manage and teach diverse learners ranging in age from 4 to 10 years or more. Yet teachers are the single most important factor in creating effective classrooms. They can be a crucial asset or a major barrier when young children start formal education. It is vital to have teachers

who are trusted, conscientious and motivated, who are specially trained to support children’s social and emotional development, and who encourage and promote learning. These teachers must be supported, rather than only inspected, by the school head and supervisors (Shaeffer, 2006; Odaga and Henevald, 1995; Bruns et al, 2003; UNESCO, 1998).

Effective learning is influenced by the teacher’s status, skills, competencies and access to core teaching and learning materials – for example, teachers’ guides and textbooks. Most Grade 1 and 2 teachers lack proper training in imparting and nurturing literacy skills.

A transition study in Jamaica by Bailey and Brown (1998) on pre-school and Grade 1 highlighted the need for more attention to key skills such as listening, speaking and observing, as well as a need to improve classroom structure for better learning. The authors recommended changes in teacher training and more diverse materials focused on child-centred learning, greater interaction and individualised learning.

Reforms ignore child-level data and children in early grades

While data on enrolment, drop-out, repetition and achievement are readily available, they are seldom disaggregated by grade. Yet such breakdowns are needed at the school level, in the formulation of school development plans, as well as at the system level, including national programmes for improving the quality of education.

Much work has been done internationally on school improvement and effectiveness (Farrell and Oliveira, 1993; Anderson, 2002). School improvement programmes and education reforms combine professional development with in-class mentoring support for teachers. They also result in better school management and leadership, enhance community engagement and improve system supports. The evolution is similar worldwide. Initially, attention focused on class teachers and teaching materials. However, the importance of principals and School Management Committees was soon recognised because of their crucial role in setting the school 'climate' and providing leadership. 'Whole school' approaches began to emerge which embraced parental and community engagement. As efforts continued, the wider school system that enabled or prevented positive change came into sharp relief. This led to increased emphasis on strengthening and reforming systems.

While it is essential to pay attention to the multiple levels that affect quality, education reforms have sometimes made too many assumptions about the impact of these measures on children and their learning. They have also been almost uniformly weak in systematically addressing learning needs and key issues at early primary grades, even where drop-out and repetition rates in the first two years have been high. This may be due to not having reviewed and disaggregated the data at the school level during the design of school development plans. It may also be due to poor understanding among planners, development agencies and governments, of the teaching and learning

processes that actually work best especially for poor and marginalised students (Abadzi, 2006). Even where there are ECD services, schools hardly link with them. The challenge is to ensure a clear focus on better learning opportunities for all children, but with learning needs in the early grades commanding special attention.

The early years of primary school are in many ways a 'front line' for the children involved but also for those striving to attain quality education for all.

Moving forward: improving the transition process

School improvement programmes and other education reforms must focus energy and resources on early primary education.

Lessons from the health sector: systematically measuring 'survival' in the first year of school

The health sector has long measured child survival using two key points in time: age 1 (for infant mortality rate) and age 5 (for child mortality rate). The rationale is clear: infants are highly vulnerable immediately after birth and during the first year of life. Specific strategies for this period, such as pre- and post-natal care, immunisation and exclusive breast-feeding, are well-known by mothers and caregivers. Surviving the first year is a major milestone.

It may be time for the education sector to initiate a similar 'rate of survival'. Thus, in addition to having data on primary school completion

rates, there would be an intermediate indicator of early primary survival. It would mean systematically tracing promotion from Grades 1 to 2 as well as drop-out and repetition rates for Grade 1. Such data are of particular importance for those countries which are furthest behind in enrolment and completion rates. However, these data are not easily gleaned even from key reports tracking progress on MDG and EFA targets. While UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report on Quality (2005) included both drop-out and repetition by grade, none of the preceding three GMRs consistently tracked these rates. Given that the first year almost always has the highest drop-out and repetition rates, these data are essential. Failure to capture this information means missing excellent opportunities to design problem-specific strategies such as those highlighted in the following section.

Improving policy and practice: a 'transition' framework

Remarkably few of the key international reports adequately underscore the importance of developing strategies for the early primary years. This paper recommends using a 'transition' framework deliberately linking ECD and early primary components. This means introducing the active learning methods and welcoming atmosphere seen in good ECD programmes into the early grades of primary school, along with support for pre-school child development.

In North America and Western Europe, there has been interest in transition issues for some time (Carnegie Corporation, 1996; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development,

2001). The literature emphasises that early childhood programmes are most effective when integrated into a broader coherent framework linking early child development initiatives to the child's home and to primary schooling (Lombardi, 1992; Carnegie Corporation, 1996; Bertrand and Beach, 2004). Margetts's (1999) study in Australia suggests that transition programmes should retain the benefits of pre-school programmes, reduce stress, create an appropriate degree of continuity, respond to the diversity of children's backgrounds and provide positive experiences.

Continuity is key. As children move into early primary, their motor and language skills are developing, they have a longer attention span, they play more cooperatively and their interests are widening. However, throughout the pre-school 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 early grades cannot be over-emphasised. Developmentally appropriate practice, whether at home, in an ECD centre or a primary school 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 cooperation" (Lombardi, 1992). In other words, it facilitates the child's development as a capable learner. Parents can be key allies. It is common to find parents who had often earlier complained that their children were 'only playing' in early

childhood programmes making comparisons with the lack of effective learning in primary schools. Despite initial reservations about child-centred learning methods in ECD programmes, their children's obvious progress wins them over.

Abadzi (2006) advocates a shift in policy to invest more in the lower grades and emphasises the benefits of such a shift for the upper grades. She recommends strategies specifically for Grade 1 and 2 teachers. These include smaller classes, clear and consistent classroom practices, use of the first language to teach reading and basic concepts, books that can be taken home and bringing in people who can help children acquire reading skills, such as older students. Specific training for lower primary teachers (who should be the most experienced teachers) is strongly recommended to improve skills to support young learners and address the teaching of early reading and mathematics.

Some countries are moving towards integrated initial training across the age span, so that teachers at all levels have a common theoretical base. Curriculum frameworks that bridge pre-school and primary education strengthen pedagogical continuity as does joint in-service training. A multi-country study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2001) examining various policies and programmes on early childhood provision found that attention to children's transition to school led to more policy focus on building bridges between pre-school and early primary, including staff training, regulation, administration and curricula.

Risks: Many working in ECD have reservations about connecting ECD to the formal system. Shaeffer (2006) summarises the challenge in parts of Asia. "To ease the transition do we formalise the informal...or de-formalise what is usually considered formal? Unfortunately the former seems to be the trend." The fear that ECD programmes can be hijacked to become essentially a downward extension of uninspiring primary schools has sometimes been well-founded. Active participatory methods in which children learn by doing, manipulating concrete objects, talking with others, discovering things for themselves in an atmosphere of encouragement and success can be replaced by ultra-formalised methods where the child is reduced to a passive recipient. Many pre-school centres use inappropriate methods in a misguided attempt to give children an academic edge when they enter school. They push reading, writing and mathematics to levels for which children are not yet ready, rather than laying firm foundations in language, enthusiasm for learning and interaction. However, there are positive experiences in which the best of early childhood practice influences lower primary. Articulation between early childhood programmes (where they exist) and primary school is vital in helping children and families manage the transition to school.

Strong partnerships with the education system provide opportunity for sharing diverse perspectives and methods, and synthesising best practices. ECD and primary school learning goals and curricula frameworks must be coordinated and reviewed regularly.

Examples of programmes

The section below highlights a variety of strategies for transition, from several promising programmes. Some of the programmes have been specifically designed to address transition, while others are strategies within more broadly based primary education or ECD efforts.

Initiatives that deliberately link ECD and primary schools

Various efforts in different regions demonstrate successful ‘pushing up’ of developmentally appropriate practice into the formal system. 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. “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, 2002).

In the USA, the Child–Parent Center Program is part of the Chicago Public School system and is often housed in the local primary school. The pre-school and primary school components operate in tandem, thus assuring a high level of learning continuity for child and family. The pre-school programme has influenced the primary school system, resulting in smaller classrooms, more teachers and low student–teacher ratios. Parental involvement is central: parents dedicate at least half a day per week to the classroom. Results include high

educational attainment, low repetition and low levels of delinquency (Promising Practices Network, 2003). In a similar ECD–local primary school integration, parental involvement was a key recommendation in the final report of the Early Years Study to the Government of Ontario (McCain and Mustard, 1999).

In Nepal, Save the Children supported a transition programme introducing children (during their last few months in the ECD centres) to some of the activities and skills that would be emphasised once they entered school. The programme also arranged visits to the school and ensured the Grade 1 teacher visited the children in the centre. Interventions included working with all teachers in the primary school to develop a commitment to children’s rights – with particular emphasis on providing a welcoming, non-punitive atmosphere, especially girls and *dalits* (members of the lowest caste), and on using active learning approaches. Particular attention was given to the first two grades. Grade 1 textbooks were the basis for a hands-on training package putting active learning into practice. Ensuring that the activities were recognised by teachers as helping children learn skills and concepts in the textbooks was critical in getting buy-in from teachers with limited education and support. Low-cost or free learning materials were also provided. Results indicate a significant improvement in school attendance, pass rates, promotion and a corresponding reduction in drop-out and repetition (Bartlett et al, 2004; Arnold and Pandey, 2003). Similarly, the Early Learning for School Success (SUCCEED) Programme in Bangladesh, funded by the

United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 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 Transition Programme began in 2001, with UNICEF supporting the government's Basic Education and Early Childhood Education (BEECE). Here, too, the link has been made between pre-school and primary school; children transiting from one to the other (ages 4–8) are tracked. The objectives are to improve the quality of teaching and learning in pre-schools and Grades 1 and 2, as well as improving coordination and cooperation between the two, parental support for children's learning, and attendance and enrolment. The pilot deliberately focuses on literacy through an integrated curriculum. Teachers from both levels attend in-service workshops which include modelling to promote early literacy. Parents attend workshops on supporting early literacy in the home.

In India, Bodh Shiksha Samiti is a Rajasthan non-governmental organisation (NGO) pioneering innovative approaches in education for the most disadvantaged in urban slums and rural areas. They work through their own *bodhshalas* (Bodh's informal urban schools) and government schools. Classrooms have plenty of low-cost, or free, learning materials and there is good peer support amongst teachers who continuously assess students on all academic subjects, the arts and social interactions. Grades

are replaced by three broad levels for children between ages 3 and 16 or so. Bodh's approach has a particularly strong impact on girls and marginalised students (AKF, 2006; Gowani and Tiwari, 2006). The *bodhshalas* offer seamless integration between pre-school and primary school (Govinda, 2006). Bodh-supported primary schools have a drop-out rate four times lower than that of non-intervention schools in Rajasthan (AKF, 2004).

The Madrasa community-based early childhood programme has worked with Madrasa Resource Centre (MRC) support for more than 15 years in Kenya, Zanzibar and Uganda. It is a response to families' desire to give children a good start, supporting school success while also reaffirming cultural and religious values. The community-owned pre-schools offer girls and boys a rich learning environment. Early on, MRC staff received reports that when children enrolled in Grade 1 they experienced a serious 'jolt' with the change in learning environment. The MRCs now have annual Open Days and workshops for Grade 1 teachers and school heads from the schools the pre-schoolers graduate to. During these sessions, MRC staff display learning materials. This has proved effective in engaging their primary colleagues in discussion on 'active learning' principles, key for those who had viewed pre-school activities as 'pure play'. Now, early primary school teachers are requesting training and support in developing their own teaching and learning materials.

In Guyana, a research project brought nursery school teachers, Grade 1 teachers and parents together to discuss problems children face when

moving to the next level (Rodrigues, 2000). The usual disconnects between ECD and the formal system led to many children leaving Grade 1. The initiative saw both groups of teachers agreeing on goals for children, including basic skills and cognitive development, socialisation to respect elders and community members, 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 and establishing ‘corners’ for learning. Grade 1 teachers modified classroom activities to adapt to the learning styles of younger children.

Strategies targeting primary schools

The Aga Khan Foundation’s Releasing Confidence and Creativity (RCC) programme in Pakistan is a good example of adaptation for relevance. After analysing government school data showing high early drop-out and repetition rates, the programme managers reoriented RCC from a general school improvement programme to an initiative deliberately targeting the *katchi* class (an in-school preparatory year) and Grades 1 and 2. RCC partners undertook the following: ECD awareness raising, training local women as *katchi* class teachers, establishing *katchi* classes, providing low-cost learning materials and encouraging parent and community involvement in the local school, for example, to teach local songs and stories, to demonstrate specific skills and to assist in construction. The *katchi* classes became bright beacons in the schools – full of colour and enthusiastic activity. Demand from parents, teachers and children alike resulted in project activities being extended

to include Grades 1 and 2. Enrolments in RCC schools showed a marked increase between 2003 when the programme was introduced and 2005: it rose by 12 percent in *katchi* and 37 percent in Grade 1. Drop-out rates for girls declined from an already low 4.3% after one year of project interventions to less than 2% in *katchi* class and to less than 1% in Grade 1. Girls’ attendance increased dramatically in RCC schools: between 2003 and 2005, attendance increased from 62 percent to 82 percent for *katchi* classes, and from 65 percent to 82 percent in Grade 1.

In Cambodia, the UNICEF-supported School Readiness Programme introduced a course for children in the first two months of their formal education, to compensate for lack of formal pre-schooling and for generally poor early childhood development experiences (UNICEF, 2004). The programme resulted in improved learning, measured by a standardised test. Follow-up at the end of Grade 1 on language and mathematics skills (the core curriculum) found significant impact in 22 out of 25 areas. Differences were particularly positive and significant in topic areas relating to Khmer language and reading skills. Khmer is widely spoken in Cambodia.

A similar programme introduced in the Philippines some years ago was abandoned in favour of making the whole of Grade 1 a more child-friendly learning experience.

In Mali, where the provision of ECD services is minimal, an approach called *Pédagogie convergente* is being introduced. For the first years of schooling, teaching is in the local

language and French is introduced slowly, 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 implementation, the children were better skilled than most third-year pupils. Skills included reading and understanding, and applying calculations beyond simple memorisation. Local language emerged as the critical factor. “Children understand what they are learning, therefore they can learn” (DFID, 1999).

Escuela Nueva, established in the 1970s as a system of community education in rural Colombia, expanded to 18,000 schools by the 1990s (Rugh and Bossert, 1998). In multi-grade classrooms, teachers are trained to work with students using participatory methods and to plan lessons that respond to students’ different abilities and interests. Parent and community involvement are central, and *Escuela Nueva* participation in agricultural extension, athletic competitions, health campaigns and community celebrations is much higher than that of neighbouring government schools (Psacharopoulos et al., 1993). Students from *Escuela Nueva* scored considerably higher on tests on socio-civic behaviour, Grade 3 mathematics and Spanish than students in traditional rural schools. Children in *Escuela Nueva* schools were also found to be more confident than their counterparts in government schools. The self-esteem of girls and boys was equal, testifying to the holistic, child-centred philosophy used in this school system (CGECCD, 1997). *Escuela Nueva* is interesting, in part 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 are inclined to continue education while their counterparts in traditional schools are dropping out of Grades 1 and 2 in large numbers.

The Step by Step Transition Primary School Programme implemented across nearly 30 countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) establishes an intentional connection and overlap in teaching and learning styles between two normally distinct levels. Where possible, Step by Step children move into the same primary school classrooms. In pre-school, children participate in role activities like ‘Play 1st Grade’. Children from Grade 1 are invited to the pre-school to share experiences. Parents and community are actively involved in the transition between pre-school and Grade 1. Collectively, pre-school teachers and parents review the primary school curriculum and discuss the child’s situation to make sure he or she has the skills necessary for Grade 1. Primary and pre-school teachers are trained in the same pedagogic framework, using the same seven core modules: individualisation, learning environment, family participation, teaching strategies for meaningful learning, planning and assessment, professional development and social inclusion. For the first four years of primary education (ages 7–10), classrooms are not graded to ensure continuity of teaching and learning. Teachers use learning materials effectively to help learners develop a firm grounding in subjects.

Chapter 3: Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

Investment in young children offers outstanding returns at all levels. Documentation and evidence from all parts of the world have grown significantly in the last decade (Young, 1996; Arnold, 2004; Bertrand and Beach, 2004; Mustard, 2005).

Based on this review, this paper recommends action on the following five needs:

1. more and better ECD
2. better links, coordination, cooperation and understanding between ECD programmes and the primary school system
3. more attention to the early grades of primary school, as a central component of effective education reform
4. parental involvement at all stages
5. better data and information.

1. More and better ECD

Actions needed:

Increase coverage and scope of ECD programmes

- Offer flexible supports that enable families to provide for their children's overall development. Integrate interventions in health, nutrition and child development programmes that promote better caregiver–child interactions.
- Introduce centre-based programmes for children for a year or two before they enter Grade 1. These preparatory programmes

would offer new and expanded experiences and learning opportunities in a group setting.

Target the disadvantaged

- Focus efforts to ensure that the most disadvantaged children, who also stand to benefit the most, are reached.
- Advocate policy reform (for instance, increased public expenditure or legal frameworks for private sector involvement) to ensure services reach children in both the formal and informal sectors.

Re-orient ECD as a field so that it gives adequate attention to 6–8-year-olds as a group within its purview, in addition to the 0–3 and 3–5 age groups.

Engage in more effective ECD advocacy

- Provide hard, local evidence and more accessible study results. Use existing studies to the maximum, and tailor the presentation of findings to the needs of particular groups. For example, policy-makers are likely to be drawn to system benefits and increases in efficiency.
- Tap fully into the growing body of evidence from developing nations demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of interventions targeting disadvantaged groups (Boocock and Lerner, 1998). Highlight ECD's efficacy in reducing poverty and promoting social harmony through its ability to dissolve

social, economic and gender inequalities. This underscores the importance of public investments in ECD interventions, which can break the inter-generational poverty cycle (CGECCD, 2004).

- Increase understanding of ECD's significance as a frontline strategy for achieving EFA goals and MDG targets. Explore where ECD can be incorporated into fast track initiatives (FTIs) and broad-based poverty reduction programmes. Increase understanding of ECD's significance in the fight against poverty and ensure greater accountability regarding the impact of poverty-reduction programmes on young children.

2. Better links between ECD and primary school

Actions needed:

Deliberately link ECD and early primary components to ensure children are ready for school, and equally important, schools are ready for children.

Conceptualise and implement services emphasising continuity of methods and appropriate practice. The neglected transition period should be planned for as a whole, rather than only within ECD or within primary.

Actions include:

- Initiatives to introduce children and their parents to some of the activities, skills and themes they will encounter in Grade 1. These readiness programmes may be part of an ECD programme or an independent school

initiative where there is no ECD programme.

- Exchange visits. Pre-school children visit school before joining and the Grade 1 teacher visits ECD centres that 'feed' their primary school.
- Regular joint training and meetings between ECD and teachers for Grades 1 and 2 to exchange ideas, share materials, support each other and develop curricula that promote continuity and appropriate methods.
- Providing Grades 1 and 2 with learning materials similar to those used in ECD programmes – for example, manipulatives and storybooks.
- Staging regular parent and community meetings to discuss children's progress and ideas on how parents can further support their children's learning at home.

Lobby for adequate ECD provision in school catchment areas. Achieving this will slash the number of under-age children in Grade 1 and reduce failure and repetition rates. This single step could halve Grade 1 sizes in many countries.

3. More attention to early primary school in education reform

The percentage of children enrolled in ECD programmes is still small in many countries. And of this small number, most do *not* come from the disadvantaged groups that most need educational support. This makes it all the more urgent to ensure that the quality of the first years of primary school is improved.

Actions needed:

Overhaul traditions in school improvement

at all levels, from school management and district education authorities, to education ministry officials, donor agencies and even international and local NGOs, so that education efforts incorporate prescriptive measures in the early grades. Most, if not all of them, are well aware of the problems but short on solutions. This change in thinking must be embedded in national plans and strategies, FTIs and so on.

Prioritise attention and resources to early primary (as opposed to current practice) to ensure:

- experienced and capable teachers in the lower grades
- a welcoming, appreciative and inclusive environment with no bullying or humiliation
- smaller class sizes and more manageable teacher–child ratios at least in Grades 1 and 2
- daily schedules that encourage active learning and stronger emphasis on language skills and reading
- using first language for teaching basic concepts and reading; bilingual classes
- provision of books children can borrow, especially those that build on local culture, stories, songs and poems
- a variety of low-cost or free learning materials (in addition to books) to help children grasp basic concepts such as numerical relations (for example, through the use of seeds and containers); Grade 1 kits that can be easily updated or replaced over time.

Enhance teacher training and supports.

- Build and deepen an understanding in early grade teachers of how young children learn. Strengthen their skills in fostering early literacy, numeracy and problem-solving. Support teachers in introducing enjoyable active learning strategies directly linked to existing textbooks and curriculum objectives. This link is important since resistance to new methods often stems from a perception that these activities are optional ‘add-ons’ rather than learning aids.
- Retool teacher educators. Improve their knowledge and skills in the use of teaching methods appropriate for young learners, that is, methods that ensure an orderly approach to learning new tasks (such as clear explanations, regular checking for understanding and time for children to practice new skills).
- Provide regular follow-up support to, and mentoring of, teachers. These include appreciation, encouragement and clear and practical advice, as well as professional development for early grade teachers’ supervisors (school heads, district education supervisors and inspectors).
- Organise early grade teacher exchanges so that teachers can support and learn from each other.
- Strengthen multi-grade teaching skills and creative use of older students – for instance, reading with younger ones.

4. Parental involvement at all stages

Actions needed:

Capitalise on and learn from the effectiveness of ECD programmes in building parent and caregiver engagement with education.

Increase parental and community engagement.

- Provide a welcoming environment for parents to discuss their children's progress and other concerns through an informal open-door policy, specific open days, parent-teacher meetings and social events.
- Encourage representation of parents from different socio-economic groups in school management committees, and ensure transparency and open communication on matters such as the school budget and expenditures, and teacher recruitment.
- Involve parents in school self-assessments, school improvement planning and building consensus on key 'quality' indicators for the school to ensure equitable girl and boy enrolment, retention and success in school.
- Support the involvement of the community in collecting and managing information, for example on out-of-school children and school attendance.

5. Better information and data

Actions needed:

Data collection and analysis: Include data and analysis on drop-out, repetition and promotion by grade as well as overall figures for primary. Compute Grade 1 drop-out as a percentage of the overall primary school drop-out rate.

Ensure this is part of key reports at national and international levels, including all future EFA monitoring reports, MDG progress reports or FTIs.

Record-keeping: Strengthen school record-keeping and assist schools to extract information, for their own use, disaggregated by class from standard forms which they complete for education authorities. Enable schools to review the information regularly, plan accordingly and track changes within the school.

Qualitative studies: Carry out qualitative studies of change within the schools and the community, for example, parent and student perceptions on schools, reasons for drop-out and so on, to complement quantitative information and deepen understanding of underlying dynamics.

ECD impact analysis: Continue economic analysis of the impact of ECD programmes on efficiency in education systems and poverty reduction. Document how effective ECD programmes enhance the sense of agency for caregivers and communities to act on their own behalf and on behalf of their children. Investigate whether ECD sparks the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004). Investigate what happens as ECD expands and is absorbed into the formal system, particularly in majority world countries. Questions include: How are ECD policies developed, implemented and monitored? What are the impacts on children? What are the implications for programme quality? Is it an opportunity to positively

influence primary or is it an unwelcome downward extension of primary? What happens to family and community engagement and ownership?

Much of this paper has been concerned with ways to improve the quality of learning opportunities for children. Defining quality is not easy, but at its centre is the relationship between learners and teachers. Whether with regard to children's first and most influential teachers (their families), 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 this paper's concern.

Transition issues must be given greater attention if children's overall development and learning are to improve. A transition framework deliberately links ECD and early primary

components by expanding ECD initiatives and increasing attention to Grades 1 and 2. The goal is to address the acute crisis of high drop-out and repetition in the early primary years, and to eradicate persistent patterns of failure. Early childhood interventions ensure children are ready for school. But equally important, schools must be ready for children who may or may not have benefited from an early childhood programme.

Such an approach would dramatically improve the chances of meeting EFA goals and MDG targets and make an important contribution to breaking deeply entrenched cycles of poverty and exclusion. These and other social problems can be overcome by the powerful combination of focusing on the neglected lower grades of primary school coupled with support to children's overall development before they enter school.

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About the Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

- Through “Strengthening the Care Environment” we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable parents, families and communities to care for their children.
- Through “Successful Transitions: The Continuum from Home to School” we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school.
- Through “Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity” we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share.

Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

About the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF)

The Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) is part of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Founded and guided by His Highness the Aga Khan, the AKDN brings together a number of international development agencies, institutions and programmes whose mandates range from the social sector and culture to architecture and the promotion of private-sector enterprise. AKF works primarily in the poorest parts of South and Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and aims to improve living conditions and opportunities (often in remote marginalized areas), and empower communities to respond to the challenges of social, economic and cultural change. AKF focuses on rural development, education, health, environment, and the strengthening of civil society. The goal of AKF's education programme is to 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. AKF emphasizes building an inclusive and relevant ladder of education opportunities beginning from early childhood and extending through to secondary. Support to selected tertiary institutions promotes professional development of educators and fosters leadership across all levels of education reinforcing school and community level efforts. www.akdn.org

Information on the series

Working Papers in Early Childhood Development is a ‘work in progress’ series that presents relevant findings and reflection on issues relating to early childhood care and development. The series acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas, often arising out of field work, evaluations and training experiences. As ‘think pieces’ we hope these papers will evoke responses and lead to further information sharing from among the readership.

The findings, interpretations, conclusions and opinions expressed in this series are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.