Looking after society's treasures

The challenges of early childhood education

Based on an interview with Rosa María Torres, Fronesis Institute[1]

"If people were aware of what is at stake in the first few years of life, small children would be considered society's treasures." Rosa María Torres

ECM: The benefits of investing in early childhood education are widely recognised. So why is this so often neglected, particularly in terms of the most vulnerable sectors of the population?

Rosa María Torres: Generally speaking, little attention is paid to the most vulnerable sectors, not only in terms of education but also in everything else. That is why they are, and will always be, 'vulnerable'. What produces and perpetuates this 'vulnerability' is the economic, social and political model. I'm putting the word in inverted commas as it is a term that glosses over many concepts, including injustice, inequality, unfairness, discrimination and violation of basic rights. It also lumps together the large numbers and diverse sectors that suffer such circumstances: the poor, children, women, indigenous groups, those with special needs, sexual minorities and all those who are subjected to ill-treatment and subordination.

With regard to small children, the facts show that recognising the importance of their early years and their education (whether delivered by parents or carers) for all-round childhood development is still more of an ideal than a reality. If people were aware of what is at stake during the first few years of life, small children would be society's treasures in all senses and, together with their mothers and families, they would receive preferential treatment. But this is not happening. Child mortality, morbidity, malnourishment, neglect, abuse, lack of affection and protection continue to occur at an alarming rate all over the world. The absence of opportunities for learning and development pales into insignificance when millions of children are not even expected to survive their early years.

To be a child and poor is a bad combination in our societies, since it leads to two main sources of discrimination: socio-economic status and age. Whilst poverty is officially recognised as a discriminatory factor, age usually goes unnoticed. Nevertheless, it is evident that both the early and late years of life are given extremely low priority in terms of public policy making and human rights. In education, top priority is still given to the so-called 'school age' as defined over the past few centuries. In fact, educational provision extending below that age is still strongly associated with the 'pre-school' brand of teaching.

The world initiative Education For All (EFA) launched in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 and reaffirmed in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, is a clear example of this bias. Out of the six goals set, least attention was paid to the two goals referring to small children and adults. What is more, these two goals were not included in the EFA Development Index (EDI), which has been running since 2003 with the aim of monitoring the initiative's progress. The reason given for this omission is that 'the data is not sufficiently standardised' (EFA 2007). Early childhood and adulthood are also absent from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN 2000), within which the education goal focuses on achieving universal primary education, basically the survival rate to Grade 5.

The problem here is that, even with today's widespread rhetoric on the knowledge society and lifelong learning, the terms education and learning are still linked strongly to school education. Learning that takes place outside school in daily life – in the family, community, during play, at work, in contact with others, from independent reading, from the media, etc. – is not regarded as learning nor is it taken into account in educational policy development. Despite this, the right to education, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948), includes education both in and outside school.[2]

A number of problems, grey areas and unresolved debates persist in the two marginalised and interlinked fields of education and learning for small children and adults. Even the terminology is inconsistent. This becomes plain when you analyse how the EFA goals are formulated.

Goal No. 1, as set in Jomtien in 1990, aims for "Expansion of early childhood care and development activities, including interventions by families and the community, especially for poor, disadvantaged and disabled boys and girls." However, the 2000 (Dakar) version states: "Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children." There are clear differences between the concepts (care and development versus care and education), the intentions (to expand versus to improve provision) and the scope of action (in 1990 the emphasis was based on the family and the community, but this was omitted in 2000). Neither version quantified the goal, making it difficult to measure and enforce. The 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report, which focused on the EFA's first goal, took 2000 as its starting-point rather than 1990 (when EFA was initiated globally), concluding that 'halfway through 2015' the goals referring to early childhood and adult literacy are those receiving the least attention and are the most likely to fall behind (UNESCO 2006).

Is the 2000 revised goal really the same one that was set in 1990? We think not, because there is a huge difference between placing the emphasis on the development compared to the education of small children. The topic has prompted much debate, not only on the terminology but also on the core issues at stake. Placing the emphasis on education, especially bearing in mind that education tends to be linked with schooling, risks fostering views and strategies that see early childhood education as a kind of early school, destined to compensate for shortcomings and even to prevent school failure in the poorest sectors, which is how the World Bank openly sees and justifies it.

As an educator, I know and always say that the goal is not education but learning (remembering that not all education produces learning and not all learning is the product of education). This is valid for any age and what is really important is the child's all-round development, which involves integrating education within all aspects of development.

Latin America has a broad school provision, but assessment of learning is not producing the expected results. How can this be explained?

Let us talk first about what we mean by school provision, learning assessment and expected results.

Provision, registration, retention, achievement and learning are different things and it is vital to differentiate between them and help people to understand the differences. School provision does not guarantee access and is certainly no guarantee of learning. It is one thing to have school places available but another to ensure families can access them, not only in terms of physical distance but also in terms of expense. Let us not forget that state education is no longer free in the majority of Latin America (Tomasevski 2006). It is also true, however, that efforts are being made to eliminate the so-called 'self-management' and 'voluntary' fees that poor families are forced to pay, thereby returning to a situation in which the right to education is safeguarded by making it free.

On the other hand, you can go to school, complete a whole education cycle and learn very little. In fact, there are people who leave school and even college without having learned to read and write properly and, even worse, without having developed any need or desire to do so. Some children learn only through the fear of being ill-treated and fail to make a connection between classroom learning and

everyday life. All these issues contribute to poor quality education.

The aim of education is to learn. However, the efforts at global level and in many Latin American and Caribbean countries are still centred on provision and registration and on infrastructure and budgets, ignoring the central issue of education. Even at international level, the term universalisation (of early childhood, primary and secondary education, etc.) is becoming understood as universalising registration. At the same time, quality and learning are playing a less prominent part in global education initiatives. In fact, quality and learning are absent from the education goal of the MDGs. Learning also disappeared from the EFA goals when they were reaffirmed in Dakar. In addition, the EDI measures education quality as 'survival rate to Grade 5', which is a step backwards in terms of the research and advances made over recent decades.

Returning to the Latin American context, you can see that this region is outstanding in its high level of school provision and registration compared to other developing regions. However, it also has high rates of school truancy and repetition, as well as poor academic results, not only in state but also in private schools, although the trend is clearer in the state sector. In other words, we have made a great deal of progress in universalising access to schooling but not in the universalisation of learning. This is the really important and most difficult issue because it requires greater effort than simply building schools and creating new teaching jobs. Universalising learning (and this is applicable to all regions in the world) implies going beyond educational policy in the narrow sense to safeguard the essential conditions for learning, which include families' subsistence, work, housing, food, health and leisure.

Can you tell us more about the distinction between learning and school performance?

Learning takes place both inside and outside the school system, and what is learned at school is not limited to the prescribed curriculum. The so-called 'hidden curriculum', which comprises informal learning from relationships and practices occurring in every educational institution, can be more important and influential than what is learned in the classroom and from textbooks. Getting a good mark in a test does not necessarily mean that someone has acquired knowledge; it can show simply that information has been memorised, or that there has been copying from other people. Not all learning can be assessed with tests; there are important learning experiences that can only show when knowledge is applied to understanding and resolving problems, either abstract or practical, real-life situations. We also know that different people have very different learning rhythms, styles and strategies.

So what are the expected results of learning assessment? Pupils getting good marks, passing tests, finishing the year? The school looking good in academic performance ratings? Countries improving their placing in international rankings? This is the predominant approach and one that accepts the prescribed curriculum as valid and unquestioned, taking its application by teaching staff and assimilation by pupils as the parameters of achievement. For educational institutions and countries alike, this implies working on the basis of tests and results, keeping their sights set on quantitative indicators and rankings.

I prefer to believe that expected results are based on pupils' and families' satisfaction, on valuing effort, on due care for the process and not just for the result itself, and on fully respecting the right to education, which implies the right to equal learning opportunities for all, the right to learn and to learn how to learn, as an interesting and pleasurable activity, without ill-treatment, with affection, using the time, languages and methods required in each case.

What role does teacher training play in improving the quality of education and what are the main challenges facing it today?

Teaching quality is an essential factor in educational quality. But teaching quality does not depend solely on professional training. Additional attributes for a successful teacher include a good quality of life, good working conditions, motivation to teach and to learn, personal qualities, and values and attitudes towards others, particularly their pupils.

Some of the main challenges in improving the quality of education are associated with rethinking

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misconceptions about teachers and teacher training. For example, the common belief that educational quality depends solely on teachers avoids the fact that the education crisis is the responsibility of all of us and that the problem can be solved only through making changes in traditional ways of thinking and capacity building.

What, in your view, are the issues we should be addressing to guarantee a successful transition between home or the street and starting school?

The first is to understand that this is indeed a transition; it is a new situation and often a drastic change for parents and teachers as well as the children. At this stage, collaboration between family and school, according to each child's needs, is vital.

Not all parents are aware of what is involved in this transition, but all teachers should be and should be prepared to understand and help children deal with it, as well as explaining it to their parents. Concepts such as 'second home' or 'second mother' attributed to the educational institution and the teacher are confusing and can produce an impression of continuity where in fact there is a break. As Freire (1997) argues, calling teachers 'auntie', as is the case in Brazil, creates unwanted ambiguities in the relationship and in the teaching role.

School (which includes nursery, children's centre, pre-school or school) is very different to home, being unfamiliar to the child (and often to parents) and involving a major reorganisation to the life of the whole family. The daily routine becomes fixed by timetables and rules that may go against the child's nature, including being seated for several hours, wearing uniform, carrying school materials, order, cleanliness, discipline and homework. Not only may the child need to start using a different language, as

is the case for indigenous or migrant children, but also they have to cope with more formal language codes and rules.

It is essential to remember that the transition does not always involve losses. For children suffering extreme poverty, lack of basic services, child labour, lack of affection or ill-treatment, the children's centre or school can seem like a place of freedom rather than oppression, especially if they find the comfort, containment, play, discovery, learning, socialising and self-esteem they may be missing at home.

The presumed dilemma between asking children to adapt to school or asking schools to adapt to the children should not be seen as such, but as an attempt to bring the two closer together. However, if we had to choose, we would not hesitate to say that it is the school, with all its institutional and teaching resources, that should adapt itself to suit the children. The school should not count on boys and girls arriving with any previous experience of socialising or development. It should rather assume that this is not the case and stop regarding it as a deficiency.

What is the relationship between the literacy of parents (particularly mothers) and children's learning of the written language?

In terms of the relationship between parents' education and children's schooling, the EFA 2007 report stated that children whose mothers lacked education are twice as likely to stay out of school than those whose mothers had benefited from education. Many studies have noted this effect, which boils down to a correlation between poverty and schooling, since illiterate people are usually among the poorest in society. So here we have a first-level impact on child literacy, bearing in mind that formal reading and writing skills are normally learned at school.

Studies and evaluations of school performance do not show clearly how the level of education received by parents, especially mothers, affects child literacy. However, poor women all over the world strive to be literate so they can help their children with homework and feel involved and confident in their dealings with the school. Although the levels of literacy they attain are often insufficient, the fact that they have tried and opened themselves up to new opportunities for learning and personal growth stands them in good stead with the school and with their families.

When we talk about the impact of adult literacy on child literacy, we must define what we mean. A short programme, lasting a few weeks, does not enable anyone to read and write fluently and confidently. However, the most visible and significant impact is often an improvement in dignity and self-esteem. Although difficult to measure, both attributes have a positive impact on people and those around them, especially in the family environment. It is clear from the research available that boys and girls who grow up in literate families start school with a huge advantage. In other words, it is not only a case of making a distinction between illiterate or literate parents, but of the effective distribution of resources, actions and practice in reading and writing in daily life. In Latin America, Emilia Ferreiro's studies have thrown a great deal of light on this topic and have contributed to revolutionising written language acquisition perceptions and practices in early childhood and in schools.

We also know that education is not everything. The attitudes and expectations of parents, particularly mothers, are highly influential. This was shown by an assessment of early childhood education in Uruguay carried out in the early 1990s and which in many senses was a pioneering study in the region (Rama 1991). The study found that behind many of the best students (who had managed to break out of the vicious circle of poverty and low school performance) were mothers who believed in their children, who had great hopes for them and who encouraged them to persevere.

An important aspect shown by many programmes, studies and assessments is the close relationship between child development and adult education, and between children's education and that of their parents. Both complement each other and are mutually dependent. It is economically short sighted to view childhood and adult education as political options, as the World Bank has been defending and recommending.

Notes

1 www.fronesis.org
2 The latter was then known as fundamental education, 'the kind of education that sets out to help children and adults who lack the advantages of a formal education'.

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