

Towards more child-friendly schools

Formalise the informal, or informalise the formal

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The nature of pre-school education – what it is, what it ‘looks like’, what it is meant to ‘do’, and what role the government (especially the Ministry of Education) plays in promoting it – is one of the vexing problems facing today’s educators. The relationship between pre-school and primary education is particularly problematic.

For example, in one small, well-developed island nation, children in the last few weeks of at least one state kindergarten are no longer allowed naps and are given heavy bags to carry, to prepare them for a formal first grade classroom. In a larger, less well-developed country in the same region, first-grade teachers make the first six weeks of their classes more like their pupils’ informal pre-school experience: child-centred, interactive, no desks and chairs and with more play than is called for in most grade 1 curricula.

Thus, the dilemma: to ease the transition from pre-school to primary school, do we formalise the informal in order to give children the best possible start in an increasingly competitive academic world, or do we informalise the formal, reversing the growing rigid and achievement-oriented nature of early primary education?

Unfortunately, the former seems to be the trend. Anecdotal evidence tells of more and more elite, private primary schools (and even pre-primary schools) requiring entrance examinations to prove the learning readiness of new entrants, including an early mastery of (at least) reading. This is due partly to the fact that pre-schools are often the first rung of a private education ladder that, once attained, makes unnecessary the search for further enrolment. But this puts pressure on pre-primaries to be more

academic and competitive, with less time for child-centred learning and less ability to shape education to a pupil’s family context (e.g., its home language) or to a child’s individual needs (e.g., reading difficulties). According to academic specialists and practitioners, this is exactly what they should not be.

There is another reason for this trend. With seemingly good intentions, many governments are expanding pre-school services but, to be cost-efficient, they are attaching the new classes to primary schools, especially in countries where the population rate increase is decreasing and where there exist unused primary school resources, including teachers. This can mean that both the learning space and style are formal, teacher-centred, with more work and less play, and often with teaching in an incomprehensible majority language rather than a mother tongue.

So what to do? In a Utopian world, the best-qualified teachers would teach in primary school (if not pre-school), where classes are larger and the challenges of individualised instruction greater, rather than in secondary school. But this is only feasible if a government commits resources to a unified system of education, with the same level of training, remuneration and status for teachers in both primary and secondary education.

Failing this, and to the extent that they have control over pre-school curricula and methods, public but perhaps also private ministries can ensure that pre-primary schools continue to be places of play and learning stimulation, rather than places of regimented study, homework and academic competition. They could also demand that all primary school teacher trainees, especially those



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who opt to work in early primary education, receive training in the more informal, child-centred processes of pre-school education and in the often difficult transition process from pre-school (or the home) to primary school. Special skills, such as the analysis of individual needs and the development of individualised instruction, could be included. More systematic and better planned transitions could allow pre-school-age children and their parents to get acquainted with the primary school before starting there and make special efforts to integrate grade 1 children into their new environment.

Child-friendly schools

This means that the primary school must become a more welcoming place. Child-Friendly Schools, developed in Thailand over a decade ago (pioneered by UNICEF and Save the Children) and now being implemented in over 40 countries, are important to achieve this. Such schools have several purposes:

- to help children realise their right to good-quality education;
- to enhance the health and well-being of children;
- to guarantee children safe, protective spaces for learning and free them from violence and abuse;
- to raise teacher morale and motivation (in other words, child-friendly equals teacher-friendly);
- to mobilise community support for education.

Child-friendly schools are meant to be child-seeking schools: actively identifying excluded children, getting them enrolled in school and included in learning, and helping to monitor the rights and well-being of all children in the community. They must also be child-centred: acting in the best interests of the child, leading to the realisation of the child's full potential, focused on the 'whole' child (health, nutritional status and well-being), and concerned about what happens to the child before entering school and after leaving it.

In particular, a child-friendly school must be *inclusive* of all children, academically *effective* with all children, *healthy and protective* of children and *gender-sensitive*. It should welcome participation in school affairs by the children, their parents and their community.

A school *inclusive* of all children does not exclude, discriminate against, or stereotype on the basis of difference. It provides education that is free, compulsory, affordable and accessible, especially to families and children at risk. It respects and welcomes diversity and ensures equal opportunities for all children e.g., girls, ethnic minorities, working children, children with disabilities, and AIDS-affected children. It responds to diversity, seeing it as an opportunity rather than a problem, and meets the differing needs of children, whether resulting from gender, social class, ethnicity or ability.

An inclusive grade 1 class is especially important, since its pupils will come from different backgrounds (from pre-schools or from their homes) often with different languages and levels of preparedness. The teacher of such a class must recognise such diversity as a way to enhance the quality of education and must be able to meet the pupils' diverse needs.

An academically *effective* school promotes good-quality teaching and learning, including instruction appropriate to each child's learning needs and abilities. It provides structured content and good-quality resources and promotes quality learning outcomes by helping children learn what they need to learn (e.g., literacy, numeracy, life skills) and teaching them how to learn.

Thus, an effective grade 1 classroom, adapted to its pupils' diverse needs, is essential for a good start in basic literacy and numeracy, instilling in the children good and life-long learning habits.

A *healthy and protective* school has a learning environment that is healthy, hygienic and safe. It provides life-skills based health education; it promotes the physical and the psycho/socio/emotional health of teachers and learners; and it helps to defend and protect all children from harm, providing them with positive experiences.

A grade 1 classroom includes children with different levels of physical health and many kinds of emotional needs. Thus, a grade 1 teacher must not tolerate bullying and teasing; must not label children as 'smart' or 'dumb'; must understand the often difficult family backgrounds of the pupils; and must know how to begin a child's educational career positively.

A *gender-sensitive* school promotes gender equality in enrolment and achievement. It eliminates gender stereotypes, guarantees both boy- and girl-friendly resources, socialises children in a non-violent environment and encourages respect for rights, dignity and equality. It is critical that the notion and practice of gender relationships be introduced in grade 1 through non-stereotyped materials and teaching-learning processes, and gender-sensitive interactions among pupils.

A school which welcomes participation is child-centred, promoting child participation in school life. It is family-focused, strengthening the family as a child's primary caregiver and educator and helping children, parents and teachers establish harmonious, collaborative relationships. It is community-based, encouraging local partnerships in education, and acting in and with the community for the sake of children. Bringing a child's family into the school early in the child's school life is essential to understand the environment from which the child comes and to help parents become active participants and supporters in the education process.

Note

- 1 This article is based on an article by the author in the January–March 2006 *Newsletter* of the International Institute for Educational Planning, "Formalize the informal or 'informalize' the formal: The transition from pre-school to primary".