

# **MAKING THE CASE FOR A YEAR OF COMPULSORY PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION FOR ALL CHILDREN**

By

Rokhaya Diawara ; Programme officer education  
Focal point early Childhood Care and education  
Basis education UNIT  
UNESCO-BREDA

## **Introduction:**

At the World Forum on Education for All, held in Dakar in 2000, the international community made a commitment to expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. This goal, which is the first in the Dakar Framework for Action, is one concrete outcome of the Jomtien Declaration in 1990 and stipulates that learning begins from birth. However, the last EFA global monitoring report shows that despite progress made towards the six EFA goals with significant leaps in parity, universal primary education and adult literacy, performance remains very poor in other key areas like quality, the acquisition of life-skills and early childhood development.

An in-depth view of this situation reveals that the last EFA monitoring report from the EFA Forum- Dakar + 5, titled “EFA in Africa: benchmarks for action”, states that despite considerable progress, sub-Saharan Africa is still far from achieving EFA goals, especially goal 1. For the purpose of emphasis, goal 1 states: “Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children”. In pre-primary education, progress remains slow with considerable variances from region to region. On the average, less than 2 in 10 infants attend pre-primary schools, and coverage in Southern and East Africa is two times higher than in West and Central Africa.

## **Some key issues for reflection**

Most EFA plans on early childhood, especially in developing countries, place emphasis on pre-primary education from the age of three to the age for enrolment in primary one. Determining how this approach fits into the EFA vision that learning begins at birth is where the problem lies. Should pre-primary education be sidelined because it leaves out infants? Or, should it be promoted as a concrete goal that spearheads the EFA goals for the education sector? Should countries themselves choose the age bracket to focus on, or refrain from defending either of these positions at international level? For each country to actually have some room for manoeuvre at global level, it would be useful to put forward a few suggestions on the age bracket should be focused on, especially in the education system.

## **The challenge facing ECCE in Africa**

Africa is facing challenges on early childhood, such as: (i) improving the quality of pre-primary education; (ii) expanding education delivery; (iii) diversifying education services; (iv) developing education policies with a diverse range of strategies covering pre-primary education that is appropriate for African countries; (v) devising strategies for African governments to use; and (vi) making clear the benefits of using these strategies to structure their action, so that they develop an integrated and efficient education system. These challenges have been addressed in various ways by some countries in Africa while many others have simply turned a blind eye to the issues. How Africa overcomes these challenges is the real question. UNESCO has however taken the lead role to propose strategies that could pave way for achieving EFA goal 1. This is by instituting a year of compulsory pre-primary education for all children by drawing on a realistic vision using a scientific approach that is rooted deeply in a survey.

### UNESCO's proposed strategy:

A study was conducted in 2004 in Latin America to measure the disparities in pre-primary enrolment rates, UNESCO's newsletter on early childhood, issue N° 21. *The report, which presents the Pre Primary Education enrolment rates of 19 countries in the region<sup>1</sup> by single year of age, reveals higher rates at the upper end of the range. In some cases, the overall enrolment rates were skewed by the rates for older children who are about 5 year old and concealing significantly low enrolments among younger children in ages between 3 and 4 year old. The "disparity in enrolment rate by age-group" is higher in some countries than in others. What then accounts for these disparities? One analysis of several Latin-American countries shows that the reason is linked with the implementation of compulsory and free pre-primary education policy (UNESCO's newsletter on early childhood, issue N° 21). Table 1 show the result of the analysis done in Latin America.*

**Table 1: Countries with compulsory pre-primary education in 2000**

Country	Number of compulsory years	Age(s) when pre-primary is compulsory	Age bracket for CITE 0 level	Age for entry into primary school
Argentina	1	5	3-5	6
Colombia	1	5	3-5	6
Costa Rica	1	5	5	6
Dominican Republic	1	5	3-5	6
El Salvador	3	4, 5 & 6	4-6	7
Mexico <sup>2</sup>	3	3, 4 & 5	4-5	6
Panama	2	4 & 5	4-5	6
Peru	1	5	3-5	6
Uruguay	1	5	3-5	6
Venezuela	1	5	3-5	6

Sources: UNESCO – Early childhood newsletter N° 21

Enrolment rate in these countries shot up as a result of enrolments from the age brackets under compulsory pre-primary education. The study concludes that while a compulsory enrolment policy may not be the only reason for disparities by age-group, it is a key factor at policy level. Several countries see compulsory enrolment as a pledge of Governments' commitment to promote pre-primary education. But, it does not appear to have improved the gross enrolment rate.

Further more, instituting a year of compulsory pre-primary enrolment is a bold step, but a daunting task at policy level. Considering that primary education is a priority for African Member States, how then can this challenge be addressed despite the policy gap on early childhood? The initial idea and a window of opportunity are to establish a year of compulsory pre-primary enrolment as part of primary education in keeping with the comprehensive and integrated approach to early childhood development. UNESCO's strategy draws on the following directions:

- Making and adopting key options and guiding principles, in line with efforts to achieve the EFA goals so as to redress the negative records and trends in Africa;

<sup>1</sup> Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

<sup>2</sup> In Mexico, the law instituting compulsory and free pre-primary education is being enforced: compulsory education for children aged 5 years (as from 2004), 4 years (in 2005) and 3 years (in 2006).

- Empowering the education sector fundamentally and making early childhood a priority within the realm of the multi-sectoral management approach;
- Addressing Africa's challenges and resource shortfalls in a realistic manner (optimizing resources) and making sure pre-primary enrolment follows the holistic approach;
- Observing compulsory conditions for performance like (i) comprehensive child development, (ii) choosing and using appropriate teaching/learning methods, (iii) devising and implementing a plan to care for 0-3 year-olds.

### **Impact and effects of a year of compulsory pre-primary education**

It is somewhat tricky to talk about effects and impacts with the certainty that a scientific approach requires by just drawing on experiences on the ground. Nonetheless, one can formulate hypotheses and projections by closely monitoring the experiences on the ground, and then come up with some benchmarks for action. Despite reservations expressed, education research confirms the value added by a pre-school experience to a child who attends a day care facility as compared to the child who does not. It is in this respect that the principles put forward would be useful for improving the quality of education in nursery schools and even in primary schools. Specifically, the efficiency of this model can be summed up as follows:

- **Articulation and transition programme for efficiency and quality:** In developing a model for setting up a pre-primary class inside primary schools, it is obvious that the data required include: the organisation and use of different setting for teaching/learning, various active teaching/learning methods, and systems of community management of the programme. This information will be useful in identifying and sharing performance indicators and consequently improve the quality of primary education. For example, performance reports will be able to indicate how teachers and children in this age bracket interact in class and how they best use or design teaching/learning materials.
- **Improving pre-primary enrolment rate and diversifying education services:** There have always been complaints about the lack of reliable data and tools for monitoring/managing/evaluating early childhood programmes in Africa. The education development index, which is one of the key indicators or even the indicator most commonly shared and adopted for assessing country efforts on EFA, does not cover the early childhood sector because related data is almost inexistent or insufficiently standardized. Integrating a pre-primary class in the formal basic education sector makes it possible to build on investments and resources for the education sector.

### **Conclusion:**

While learning begins from birth, the direction to take in applying this principle should be adapted to context. For the education sector, pre-primary education is a natural entry point to early childhood development. Pre-primary education deserves to be made a priority on condition that it focuses on comprehensive child development and it is provided in an environment that keeps to basic teaching/learning standards. It should also be aligned with a plan for progressive integration of children in their early years. If these conditions are met, pre-primary education represents the most realistic means for the education system to deliver on the Declaration on EFA which stipulates that *learning begins from birth*.

It may be important to say that while the opinion presented in this paper advocated vigorously for the institution of a year of compulsory pre-primary education for all children, the principle of a comprehensive and integrated approach to early childhood care is the fundamental requirement for giving all children a good start in life. The strategy here aims at speeding up delivery of the commitments made by the international community towards ensuring that the initiatives for children in the early years are efficient and effective. UNESCO's commitment to institute a year

of compulsory pre-primary education for all children is currently being pursued by several developing countries. Once States adopt the principle, they have several alternatives from which to choose. The first and most basic of these would be to open a pre-primary class in every primary school. Gambia and Senegal are already pre-testing this approach.

## **Bibliography**

ME/DPRE (2004a). *Analyse du secteur de l'éducation*, Dakar, CREA

Etude de cas Sénégal (2003a). *Le projet d'école et le cahier des charges : des outils de contractualisation pour le pilotage*, ADEA

Etude de cas Sénégal (2003b). *Décentralisation de la gestion de l'éducation et diversification des offres : le faire-faire*, ADEA

UNESCO (2003). *Rapport mondial EPT 2003-04*, Paris, UNESCO

UNESCO (2004). *Rapport mondial EPT 2004-05*, Paris, UNESCO

UNESCO (2005). *Rapport mondial EPT 2005-06*, Paris, UNESCO

NIANE, Boubacar : Innovations Et Reformes Pour L'amélioration De La Qualité De L'éducation De Base En Perspective De L'ept, *Cas Du Senegal*

Pressoir, Eveline (2005), *Article Garantir Les Droits A La Survie Et Au Développement Du Jeune Enfant En Afrique De L'ouest Et Du Centre* Un défi pour le Bureau régional de l'UNICEF – juillet 04

UNESCO BREDIA /Pole de Dakar (2005). *Rapport Dakar + 5, repères pour l'action*

UNESCO, Soo CHOI Hang, *Séries notes Petite Enfance ECD*

<http://www.unesco.org/education/ecf/briefs>

<http://www.oecd.org/document>

Soo-Hyang Choi, UNESCO, Paris, *note petite enfance 21- avril 04, 31-mars 2006, et en cours*

Evans J. L., R G. Myers & E. M. Ilfeld, UNESCO (2003), *un guide de programmation pour le développement propice du jeune enfant*