



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

EDUCATING YOUNG CHILDREN: A BROADER VISION

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The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), convened in 1990, was an attempt to improve education, especially in developing countries. Its basic message was that developing countries and international agencies should confront the problem of illiteracy and educational decline by concentrating energies and investment in basic education.²

According to the "Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs" developed at WCEFA, national basic education would be composed of four pillars:

- a four-year concentrated, primary cycle for all children which would provide basic reading, writing, numeracy and life skills, both family and environmental;
- non-formal education for children and adults not reached by schools, especially women;
- expansion and improvement of early child development, care and education services;

- further teaching of basic knowledge and life skills to all the population through the use of the various communication channels.

What is unique about this initiative is that the definition of basic education is broader and more attuned to the realities of people's lives than earlier attempts to address these issues. Thus, although calling for educational investments in the primary cycle where the bases of literacy and numeracy are laid, the Jomtien initiative also provides an enlarged vision of national education. Education should reach out to all sections of society, should use non-formal approaches where necessary, and, in the case of early childhood, should include social inputs and community-based approaches.

The initiative goes beyond asking countries (and donors) to invest more money in education—it calls for a comprehensive re-thinking of priorities in defining basic education. This approach represents a clear recognition that the formal schooling model is inadequate, in and of itself, to address all the education needs and to prepare people to address social problems in developing countries.

Despite real success in providing education to growing numbers of children and adults,³ the outlook at the end of the eighties for education throughout the world was giving rise to serious misgivings. In the developing world, four fifths of the world's children were now surviving their first year of life, and their learning capacity was much diminished by poverty in all its forms. Educational progress made from 1960 to the early 1980s had to a large extent been overtaken by population gains. Over 100 million children did not have access to primary education, and of those who did, almost 50% dropped out before they were really literate or numerate. To add to the difficulties of education ministries, there was the realization that of the non-schooled children, over two-thirds were girls, especially in South East Asia and the Middle East, a factor destined to have serious educational and social consequences for the next generation of children. (UNICEF 1992)

Although the picture was infinitely better in the industrialized world, the situation was far from ideal. More children than ever were being educated. These children enjoyed greater intelligence, better health and a higher standard of living than ever before in human history. Yet, paradoxically, there was growing dissatisfaction with education, and evidence of a decline in learning achievement. More and more casualties of national education systems were appearing, not only in the growing ranks of barely literate and unemployed youth, but even more seriously, in the spiralling delinquency figures in the poor areas of the large cities. In short, although in Western democracies education reforms had become a common feature of each change in government, they generally failed to achieve the results intended.

Another recommendation made by the Jomtien initiative was that there should be a serious renewal of education management. At the national level, countries following the Education for All (EFA) process should:

- hold regular, national-level policy meetings on EFA;
- create information campaigns to sensitize the public to the importance of basic education;
- adopt concrete and measurable EFA goals;
- formulate a national strategy or national plan of action covering the development of integrated basic education services;
- create a national body with executive responsibility for promoting and coordinating basic education policies, programmes and services;
- increase significantly national investment in basic education;
- hold pledging conferences with donor countries and agencies in order to bring more resources to basic education.

Is the Jomtien Approach Working?

At the level of the international funding agencies, both the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have more than doubled their funding of basic education in the developing world. UNICEF has developed its basic education personnel at national level and has created a central unit at headquarters in New York to coordinate educational activities, including early child development. Its funding of basic education has increased from \$46 million dollars to \$79 million annually.

Similarly, UNESCO has stepped up its funding for basic education bringing it up to \$54 million biennially. With UNICEF, it has created a joint committee for EFA, and together both organizations have embarked on several co-operative programmes, including the ambitious *Nine Most Populous Countries Programme*, focussed on the countries in which the great majority of the world's illiterate people live. In addition, an early childhood and family unit was established.

Reaction to Jomtien has been very positive at the country level as well, and has elicited the formulation of EFA goals by over 100 countries. Over half of those countries have launched some sort of information campaign but far fewer countries have yet taken concrete steps to establish a national EFA mechanism or increase the national budget for basic education. There seems to be a trend toward greater investment in basic education, although it is still too early for data to be complete. Hopes are high that many countries will reach one of the major EFA goals of minimum 80% enrollment by the year 2000.

The following examples are taken from UNESCO's "Status and Trends" report, updating progress toward EFA goals, produced by the EFA Consultative Forum Secretariat:

- Costa Rica's national roundtable on EFA brought together the ministries of education, health, labour, planning and agriculture, as well as private and state universities, non-governmental organizations, educational associations, and aid agencies. It led to the preparation of a national action plan to provide literacy and basic skills training for women, literacy campaigns in educationally deprived areas, an integrated early childhood

development program, education provision for the disabled, and multicultural, bilingual education for indigenous people.

■ Mexico is undertaking a US \$100 million non-formal education project aimed at boosting the efficiency and quality of preschool education in ten of the poorest states of the country. By preparing children from poor families for their entrance to primary school and introducing parent education, Mexico hopes to help 1,200,000 children under the age of 4 to learn better.

■ The Dominican Republic has launched a plan devoted to *rescuing education*: to get all children between 4 and 15 in school by the year 2000 and to drastically cut the dropout rate. School councils will be set up, parent-teacher associations revived, curricula will be overhauled, and teachers' salaries increased. The education ministry has also started a "breakfast-at-school" programme so every child will be given a morning snack, which should lure them off the streets and back into school.

■ In Africa, nine Sahel countries have agreed to tackle their problems in unison. In close dialogue with UNESCO, UNDP, the World Bank and major bilateral donors, this group of countries drew up an action programme to achieve EFA by the year 2000. Through cooperation and joint action in such fields as planning and management, production of learning materials, teacher training and applied research, they intend to overcome their resource constraints and realize important economies of scale.

■ Yet another model endeavor is that of a small island country—Mauritius—whose "Education Master Plan" prepared in the wake of Jomtien, has brought together several donors to assist the country to implement it.

■ In Asia, where three-quarters of the world's illiterate adults live, political support for basic education has been especially strong. India, for example, is launching several large-scale and long-term projects in the country's most educationally deprived states. In Rajasthan, for example, the Lok Jumbish (People's Mobilization) has been set up to achieve EFA goals in 10 years. The US\$7 million programme, of which 50 percent will come from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the rest from state and central governments, aims at transferring responsibility for educational management to the village community. Every means, from electronic media to folk theater, are being used, particularly to mobilize women.

■ Nepal is striving to universalize primary education by introducing girls' scholarships, improving teacher training programmes and distributing free books. It is also organizing basic education programmes for adults.

■ Pakistan has launched a new national education plan aimed at improving basic education in the country by involving NGOs and the private sector and by increasing participation rates for girls by 8.8 percent per annum (compared to 2.5 percent for boys). Substantial government financing is being provided to ensure the Plan's success.

■ Countries in the North are also taking action. Ireland, for example, is intensifying its efforts to promote literacy for youths and adults by significantly boosting its budget for this purpose. Special attention will be given to those who have basic literacy skills but do not read and write sufficiently to cope in society. Within school, Ireland is renewing its efforts to

identify and support those children with special learning needs. These measures include improving assessment and remedial services and expanding programmes to involve parents. In addition, Ireland, which prior to Jomtien funneled its educational aid exclusively to technical and higher education, has re-examined its policy and now supports several basic education projects in Africa.

■ In line with Jomtien recommendations, the United States set a number of education goals for the year 2000: that all children will start school ready to learn, that at least 90 percent of high school students will graduate, and that all adult Americans will be literate. A National Education Goals Panel has been set up to monitor progress. Also, a non-governmental organization, the U.S. Coalition for Education for All, has been established to promote EFA awareness and action in the country.

The preceding examples notwithstanding, what has arisen so far in response to the EFA initiative is focussed mostly on the four year primary cycle. There are good reasons for this choice. The primary school network already exists and its potential is great if effectively used. Yet this being said, certain disquieting tendencies are emerging:

■ A RELATIVE NEGLECT OF THE THREE OTHER PILLARS OF BASIC EDUCATION, I.E., NON-FORMAL EDUCATION, EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND MEDIA EDUCATION

The Jomtien declaration, based on sound and well-documented educational research, recommends action in these three domains, and funding, in fact, is growing slowly. However, a difficulty international agencies encounter when trying to work in these domains is that frequently neither young children nor adults have a Ministry responsible for their education. It is easier for international agencies to work sectorally within an established formal system rather than to launch out into the uncertain waters of non-formal education and early childhood programming. In addition, in countries facing economic austerity, family and community education is notoriously difficult to promote, implement, and evaluate (especially in a context where the media are dominated by commercial concerns).

For this reason, most efforts aimed at young children have been carried out essentially by the major international NGOs in the field of child care and education, such as the Bernard van Leer Foundation and Save the Children. These organizations continue to promote child welfare and parent education through a multitude of cooperative ventures with government and local NGOs. (For additional examples, see the International Directory of Young Child and Family Institutions, UNESCO 1991) Their work has been exemplary in its concentration on the integral development of the child, grass-roots contact, promotion of local expertise, attention paid to community development and social change. (Chetley 1990)

On the other hand, most international donor agencies still tend to concentrate on formal systems, despite the knowledge that the formal education approach rarely reaches the more disadvantaged populations effectively.

Developing countries worldwide are beginning to understand the advantages of improving or establishing health and education services for the very young, in which mothers are actively involved. Though such initiatives have much wider implications, they can be supported by

education ministries as preparation for successful learning, achievement and schooling. Unfortunately as yet, sufficient investment has not emerged from most of the EFA country strategies, despite the fact that the possibility of establishing low-cost national programmes is real and effective models exist. (Myers 1992)

Parental and adult education is even more poorly endowed, although it is clear that community mobilization is essential for successful educational intervention in disadvantaged milieus, in which the majority of the world's children live.

■ THE INABILITY OF EDUCATION MINISTRIES AND FORMAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS TO KEEP PACE WITH POPULATION INCREASES

World population in 1960 was about three billion people, by the end of the century it will be six billion, and will reach, if present trends continue, ten billion by 2050. In the face of such population pressure one must not be overly pessimistic; the tripling of school enrollments since 1960 shows that where there is a will there is a way. Many developing countries have the capacity, the personnel and, most importantly, the political will to finance adequately and manage effectively their formal education systems.

However, the ability of poorer countries to reform and expand formal educational structures remains in doubt, particularly within a context of rapid population increase, growing unemployment and the impoverishment of families. The evidence suggests that many such countries-and large rural or social pockets within successful countries-will need to rely on non-formal education initiatives for many decades to come in order to cope with growing numbers of children.

■ THE PERSISTENCE OF A SCHOOL MODEL OFTEN UNSUITED TO SOCIAL NEEDS

Many developing countries, in an effort to maintain continuity and good standards, have made few changes to the education systems established under colonial rule with their equivalencies to the French baccalaureate or the Cambridge certificates. A characteristic of the traditional, centralized primary school system was to isolate children from parents and local communities in order to socialize them in the national culture, language and values as conceived by the State. Emphasis was placed on certain skills useful to the State, e.g., the acquisition of academic facts and skills more useful in industrialized, urban settings than in daily rural living.

Although parents and local communities were eager to educate their children, they were not encouraged to be active participants in the process. During the seventies and eighties, this model proved inadequate in most developing countries, and led, in addition, to a breakdown in public esteem for education and the school institution. Buildings deteriorated, teachers remained unpaid, teaching materials and schoolbooks fell into short supply. Hence, the call from Jomtien for decentralization of the traditional model, with more emphasis placed on relevance.

The danger remains, however, that the traditional model may-from lack of dynamism or political will-linger on and change more slowly than expected. In most countries, administration, teacher recruitment, curricula and evaluations are still heavily centralized and there is little encouragement of local initiative. In terms of curriculum and pedagogy, rather than extending

the more pedagogically appropriate early childhood model upward to 8 year olds, governments in many countries will choose to extend downward the formal instructional model for use with 3-6 year old children.

The question remains, therefore, how can these weaknesses of public education be overcome, while still striving toward the goal of universal education?

■ THE FAILURE TO ADDRESS THE QUESTION OF EGALITARIAN ACCESS

Although tremendous efforts are being made to discourage gender discrimination in school access, it is clear that relatively few countries have managed to ensure educational access and success for girls. This has serious implications, not only for the girls themselves, but also for future generations of children who will be mothered by uneducated young women.

Mothers, if they are educated in basic life skills, can dramatically change life for their children and inspire social and economic progress in their communities. Studies of the question suggest that the education of mothers in developing countries is as important in its effect as any other educational enterprise. The educational level of the mother has been linked significantly with falling fertility rates, decreasing infant and mother mortality, (Cochrane et al. 1980), enhanced levels of infant and child development, and greater social outcomes for children. (King and Hills 1991)

If one is serious about egalitarian access, intervention programmes need to be put into place for infants and preschool children from disadvantaged milieus. Even by age four, serious inequalities between children have already begun to appear and assessments reveal developmental delay in large numbers of children from poor or minority backgrounds. It has become apparent, particularly as the multi-cultural nature of the industrial economies has increased, that integrated and culturally appropriate intervention at an earlier level is required if all the children of the nation are to be equally cherished, and costly rehabilitation programmes avoided.

Child quality and learning capacity are much diminished by poverty in all its forms. The consequences of poverty on parents and in turn on their children are now well documented. They include poor personal health; low educational attainment including poor knowledge of nutrition, hygiene and health care; social isolation and a tendency to underutilize or have poor access to essential education and health services; a tendency to remain in the poverty trap through long-term unemployment; a tendency to become parents at a younger age; greater likelihood of having high-risk babies, etc. (World Bank 1980)

The psychosocial development of children from such a background is frequently inhibited, leaving them branded already at the age of four as slow learners. More seriously, poor prenatal care of mothers, premature or low-weight births, malnutrition and ill health at the infant stage-all endemic in very poor communities-mark or disable the young child.

A third aspect of access which is often overlooked, not by the Jomtien declaration itself, but in post-Jomtien practice, is that the economic situation in many countries makes education seem impractical to pursue. Even if a government is capable of financing a basic education system, the

social and economic benefits for a child who follows the basic four-year cycle are not immediately evident, especially when educational quality at the primary level is poor and does not lead to a place either in secondary education or in the world of work.

For this reason, improving access involves both preparing children for school—through strengthening the care and support they receive—and rethinking schools to be relevant to the community, the society *and* the individuals they serve. Women's education, attention to the conditions of the poor, and recognition of the inter-connections between an educational program and the society it is preparing students to enter are all crucial.

Support for Young Children and Families Provides a Necessary Foundation for Education for All

Social intervention at the family and community levels, especially through non-formal education initiatives, is not, in our opinion, a luxury item. It is a necessary element in any sound education strategy. This is particularly true in situations dominated by poverty, where a large proportion of children are incapable of benefiting from even excellent instruction when they enter school. In order to improve the active learning capacity⁴ of disadvantaged children several types of intervention are needed which go beyond the locus and range of the traditional school.

■ REACHING CHILDREN THROUGH FAMILIES

The active learning capacity of a child as he or she enters primary school depends to a great extent on the physical, intellectual and social gains that stem from early experience. Medical, psychological, and educational research shows that from conception to age 6 (and in particular, prenatal to three) is the critical period in the human development cycle. Nutritional, sensory motor, psychological or cognitive progress made (or deficits incurred) by children in those early years are interactive and cumulative to a much greater extent than ever again in the life cycle.

The problems which cause difficulty in school, such as lack of good health, sight and hearing defects, lack of concentration, low learning ability, and poor self-esteem, are generally rooted by the age of four when children enter kindergarten. Thus, it is necessary to provide family services that actually reach the poor.

Societal breakdown and educational decline are attributed to many causes: to overstretching of education systems, to social change, to badly prepared immigration policies, etc. These factors are real but secondary, in our opinion, to the growing inability of families to supply health, care, mediation⁵ (significant interactions) and education to children. This failure is reflected in the growing number of children—even in advanced economies suffering from short-term hunger, micronutrient deficiencies or protein energy malnutrition.

Such measures as pre-natal and follow-up health care for young mothers and their children, child health and immunization, social policies that improve labor conditions, social security schemes, parental leave, day-care and family education services, can no longer be seen as social welfare for poor people. They are in fact a question of far-reaching political choice: the recognition of the family unit as the primary provider and educator of children.

Many parents are too poor or too busy trying to survive, and do not realize the importance of their role. Many parents do not realize the profound influence that a healthy diet and a secure and regular home environment has on children. They do not know that their own modelling of values, social skills and curiosity about the world is necessary for their children's subsequent success with learning. They are unaware of the impact their talking to children has on language acquisition, mental awareness and problem-solving abilities.

Many young adults lack the confidence, knowledge and means to be good parents. Hence, it is necessary to provide social support for families. This can be accomplished in large part through expanding non-formal⁶, parent education programmes and making a conscious effort through the media to raise awareness and knowledge levels of essential life-skills.

■ REACHING CHILDREN THROUGH ADEQUATE COMMUNITY SERVICES

Can uneducated parents who live in sordid surroundings, in streets where violence and drug-pushing are the rule, who have neither employment nor self-respect, give education and self-esteem to their children? The answer must be: with great difficulty. Children and families do not exist-or thrive-in a vacuum. They need adequate community services, and in cases of serious neighborhood decay, energetic community intervention. More attention needs to be given to the basic infrastructure in communities, if educational initiatives are to be successful and reach those most in need.

More and more communities must collaborate in the major responsibilities which governments traditionally handled: questions of primary health, the care and education of children, employment, adequate housing, safety and preservation of the environment and attention to the basic needs of all. In fact, as we approach the end of this century, the Welfare State seems to be giving way to a society where families, local communities and NGOs are called to play an important and creative role in providing social support services which the State is reluctant or unable to provide. Obviously, in countries or districts where governmental or municipal services are weak or non-existent, the family and voluntary bodies, such as the NGOs and the churches, play a central role in providing an adequate supportive environment for young children and their families.

■ REACHING CHILDREN MORE REALISTICALLY THROUGH THE SCHOOL

The Education for All initiative has called for recognition that schools (if they wish to serve all) should be more open to community needs. Research would suggest that the schools need to incorporate the following approaches in order to become truly responsive to those in poverty:

- a real attention to early child development, and to the idea that child quality and active learning capacity can best be ensured through good parenting and/or quality pre-school. Recent research (Schweinhart et al. 1993) shows the values of such programmes for children and their necessity for egalitarian access;
- a broad curriculum that will include as well as the three Rs, knowledge of thinking and life skills, basic personal and social values, relevant career training;
- high-quality, remedial programmes to address learning problems of young children before they become habitual and lead into a cycle of failure and low self-esteem;
- parenting and family support: that is, education offered to parents as well as to children. The school should offer or act as a conduit for community support services, in particular to families in need. Among the more important aims of such programmes must be to provide basic health and nutrition services, to improve the status and educational level of women,⁷ to promote the rights of children⁸ either in situations of risk or within a particular society, and to train parents to supplement school instruction by giving their children "the inner engines of learning": that is, personal and social skills such as confidence, motivation, caring, common sense, perseverance and a sense of teamwork, which enable children to learn and achieve in the school context. (Rich 1992)⁹
- a dynamic linking of school, community and local government to tackle questions of social and environmental milieu.

Conclusion

The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All has rightly called attention to improving education through better management and expanded access to primary education systems. In attempting to outline how this might realistically be achieved, it has offered a broader definition, unanimously embraced by the participants, of basic education. Post-Jomtien practice, however, has still failed to embrace the three pillars of the declaration that do not relate directly to formal primary schooling. There are good reasons to believe, however, that in many situations and countries, the call for investment in families and communities, and support for decentralized, nonformal, education initiatives toward parents, may be essential for realistically attaining the goal of education for all.

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Endnotes

¹ The views and opinions expressed by the author are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not in any way commit the organization.

² Although the world illiteracy rate is slowly declining, in absolute terms, the number of illiterates continues to increase and may reach one thousand million by the year 2000.

³ Since 1960, enrollments in primary education have grown from 332 million to 593 million in 1988, an increase mostly taking place in the developing world. For example, in Africa, the enrollment rates for primary schooling doubled in that period. They went from 33% in 1960 to 66% in 1985.

⁴ Active learning capacity is defined as the ability of a child at a given moment to learn. This ability is normally mobilized by the child's natural curiosity and wish to model successful adult figures or peers. Numerous impediments combine to impair it, such as organic and functional learning deficiencies, or equally common, negative environments, bad teaching, etc. (Levinger 1992)

⁵ The concept of mediation is taken from R. Feuerstein's theory of instrumental enrichment. (1980) Here, it is used to denote the time spent by parents, adult family members or older children with young children in interactions in which meaning, concepts, life values and problem-solving abilities are transmitted. These elements are the building blocks of all education.

⁶ The characteristics of successful nonformal approaches are becoming known: active community/parent involvement, small catchment areas, minimal capital costs, knowledge of local conditions and needs, recruitment of para-teachers from the community, short initial training but continued upgrading and support, simplified curricula with emphasis on learning and life skills, regular external inputs from NGOs or administration. (UNICEF 1993, Reaching the Unreached)

⁷ One of the key solutions to population increase is the education of girls and women, but in many regions of the world, such education must still take place through non-formal, community-based programmes aimed at families.

⁸ The Convention on the Rights of the Child has given a real boost to the recognition of the child as an individual with rights both vis-à-vis the family and society at large.

⁹ Some of the better conceived early childhood intervention programmes, such as High/Scope, support the development of these social skills as well as more cognitive ones such as language development, seriation, classification, representation, number, sense of time and spatial relations.

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