
SITE VISIT: The Bophuthatswana Primary Education Upgrading Programme (PEUP) and Pre-Primary Education

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A programme developed in Bophuthatswana has attempted to address the issue of children's transition by focussing on the readiness of the primary school for children as well as children's readiness for the primary school. This article describes the Bophuthatswana Education Department's Early Childhood Programme that was designed to tackle the problem of repetition and drop-out (defined as a problem of children's transition into school), not by adding a bridging year, but by experimenting with upgrading the primary school itself and by developing a pre-primary programme for children 3-6 years of age.

The Bophuthatswana Primary Education Upgrading Programme (PEUP) began in 1980. The basic notion was that if the quality of the primary school could be upgraded, then there would be less inefficiency and waste since children would more easily make the transition from home to school. The approach taken by Bophuthatswana is supported by research. In studies undertaken to examine the 'disadvantages' of the African child's home environment, children were observed and tested before entrance into school and after a few years in school. The results of the studies indicated that "while there may be some aspects of the early home environment which are not conducive to children being school-ready at six years, these aspects are few." (Kemp 1993, 2)

The researchers argue that the issue is not the child's lack of readiness for the school. They feel their data show that "the causes of early school failure lie not in the *home life* of the children before school, but in the *actual school experience itself*." (Kemp 1993, 2) They go on to argue for a radical restructuring of the early school curriculum. Curriculum reform was one part of the Bophuthatswana PEUP; it also addressed teacher training and parent/community involvement issues.

The PEUP project was initiated to facilitate the adoption of child-centred teaching approaches in pilot primary classrooms. The objectives of the effort were to improve the learning environment by, for example, encouraging the painting of classrooms, improving the supply of adequate water and toilet facilities at schools, motivating schools to overcome shortages in classroom accommodation, and introducing appropriate learning materials, by drawing on community—and particularly parent—involvement in school matters.

In order to enter the project, schools had to demonstrate their commitment to the upgrading process. Schools were required to fulfill five conditions for entry into the programme. They had to commit themselves to the following standards: to have single sessions only; to limit their class sizes to 50; to admit pupils only if they were five and a half years old on entry; to commit themselves to carrying out certain classroom improvements, such as constructing shelves, at their own expense; and, finally, to contribute on a rand-for-rand basis to the purchase of the project furniture. This cost was absorbed by parents.

Upgrading of the classrooms began with Grade 1 in seven schools. The following year Grade 2 was upgraded in the seven schools, and the upgrading continued year by year. In addition to the physical upgrading, in-service teacher training courses were provided at the seven schools. (By 1988, all 840 primary schools in Bophuthatswana were included.)

An important aspect of the programme was the elimination of end-of-the-year examinations up to and including Standard 3. Throughout these grade levels there is automatic promotion of students. Released from the constraints of formal testing and the consequent cramming, teachers are free to institute child-centred methods at the lower end of the primary school. Not surprisingly, as students entered Standard 4 (at the end of which there is an exam), there was a return to more didactic teaching.

In 1982, at much the same time as PEUP was being introduced, there was a departmental commitment to supporting an early intervention programme for 3-6 year olds, making early childhood education part of the education system. In many schools the pre-primary programme was implemented in conjunction with the PEUP.

The Bophuthatswana pre-primary programme is unusual in that it did not have school readiness as its major aim. Its goal is to ensure that 3-6 year olds acquire adequate life and school skills so that they will become responsible adults and community leaders. The focus is on all-round development: social, emotional, spiritual, physical and mental. Life-skills include confidence, creativity, independence, logical thinking, curiosity, etc. School readiness skills involve gross and fine motor co-ordination, concentration, listening and language skills. The programme also has the stated aim of encouraging parental participation and involvement in the child's development and education. By 1994 the department had 532 preschool classes catering to some 32,000 children, predominantly in rural areas.

In terms of financing the programme, PEUP involves individuals and private institutions as well as government. The private/government partnership seems to have been an important element of this effort. While the government infrastructure provides the space for the programme, non-governmental agencies provide the curriculum and training expertise. The partnerships seem to have been effective.

Overall PEUP is considered a success story. There are a number of positive elements to the preschool model. First, it spreads the provision load and promotes parent involvement. Second, state support has led to good teacher/pupil ratios and a higher quality programme. Third, the focus on life skills preparation has been a positive feature. Taylor summarizes the experience by

stating, "it has infused primary education in Bophuthatswana with a new spirit and orientation." (Taylor 1989, 38) The value of such an infusion cannot be overlooked.

References:

Kemp, J.D. 1993. Curriculum enrichment pre-primary to junior primary. Paper presented at the SA Conference on the Restructuring of Education, 27-30 September.

Taylor, N. 1989. *Falling at the First Hurdle: Initial Encounters With the Formal System of African Education in South Africa.* Johannesburg South Africa: Education Policy Unit, University of the Witwatersrand.

Update:

After publication of Coordinators' Notebook No. 21, we received the following note from Linda Biersteker of South Africa (May 21, 1998):

Sadly, PEUP got closed down after the advent of democracy because though it was an excellent programme it was associated with the Bantustan officials and system.

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Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1999.

