
SITE VISIT: A Discussion of the Link Between the Preschool Curriculum and the 8-4-4 Standard One Curriculum in Kenya

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In Kenya, discussions on the quality of both preschool and primary school education have led to an awareness of the importance of providing for the transition between the two. Discrepancies between preschool and primary school methodologies have been identified as possible impediments to children's success in school. In line with this, suggestions are made about ways to improve existing structures which provide support to children entering primary school and, perhaps more importantly, to create new structures which can bridge the gaps between preschool and primary school.

Hanifa: How do you like your new school?

Ghaniya: I don't like the new school at all.

Hanifa: Why don't you like it?

Ghaniya: It's so big and noisy.

Hanifa: Keep on smiling and you will get used to it.

Ghaniya: But I don't like the teacher, she shouts and bangs on the table. Do you know that the teacher does not know how to welcome guests? She beat me on my first day, and I was not the one making noise.

The above exchange took place after the first day of primary school for a six-year-old in Kenya. Ghaniya, an intelligent little girl who had progressed very well in preschool, is quick to respond to the difficulties she encountered on her first day of primary school, difficulties that can make the entrance into primary school a negative experience. Ghaniya's first exposure to primary school is, unfortunately, typical, and, studies indicate, might well influence the rest of her school years. Encountering such a negative learning environment during the primary years can create obstacles which block future success in school.

The new and vastly different environments children encounter upon entering primary school often become handicaps to their performance and negatively influence their desire to stay in school. Among the drastic changes children encounter in moving from one environment to the

next are: changes in attitudes—on the part of both teachers and parents; changes in expectations; changes in classroom arrangement (there may be rows of desks instead of small tables); an increase in the number of subjects; and changes in the learning processes. All of these can create a large, unintended gap which can hinder the success, or at least the expected progress, of many children.

Ghaniya's responses serve as an illustration of the gap that exists between the different expectations teachers have of children in the pre-primary school and of those in the primary school. Parents also tend to expect more from their primary-school-age children than they do from their preschool age children. One example of this is that parents will carry or walk preschool children to preschool, but once the children are in primary school the attitude changes to, "now you are a big boy—you can walk to school on your own."

Education is a continuous, lifelong process, which starts as soon as one is born. Since preschool education is the basis of formal learning, special attention must be given to its implementation and in determining how it can help children to develop. The following is an overview of preschool provision in Kenya, including its history, its curriculum, and its objectives. This is followed by a discussion of primary school objectives. Finally, the methods and learning processes of both the preschool and primary level curriculum will be compared, leading to a discussion of the perceived gaps in classroom conditions. The attitudes and commitment of teachers at both levels of schooling are also mentioned. And finally, linkages to bridge gaps between preschool and primary education are suggested.

Preschools in Kenya. The existing system of providing for early childhood education is community based, in the sense that it is managed and run by the communities through their committees. 75% of the preschools in Kenya are community owned. Kenyan communities are diversified, and therefore, so are the preschools. There are many different types of preschools in Kenya established by different groups or organizations, such as religious organizations, employers, estates or parastatal bodies, women's groups, voluntary organizations (e.g., Rotary Club, Red Cross, etc.), private communities and individual foundations, and local authorities.

In Kenya, the educational philosophy behind the building of schools is based on the concept and practices of a Harambe spirit—pulling together. Through the Harambe philosophy, communities are strongly encouraged to establish more preschools to keep up with the rapidly growing demand for them. Although the majority of the community based and private preschools have no uniform curriculum, there are national guidelines which they can follow.

The "Guidelines for Preschool Education in Kenya" (1984), issued by the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE), is a small book of barely 70 pages. Within the Guidelines, KIE has done a very good job of providing the basis for the preschool course in the following ways: in defining the curriculum; in selecting what is to be learned and taught; in determining how the material should be learned and taught; in developing guidance on how to implement the curriculum in varying school contexts, and in providing for types of pupils, social situations, and physical environments.

The main goal for Kenyan preschools, as stated in the Guidelines, is "to prepare and equip the youth to be happy and useful members of Kenya society". The guidelines suggest that the school should enable children to develop physical skills, the concept of numbers, cognitive skills, knowledge of their environment, the ability to express ideas in words, and to gain awareness of temporal and spatial relationships.

The following are objectives for preschool education in Kenya:

- to provide an informal education geared toward developing the child's mental capabilities and his or her physical growth;
- to make it possible for the child to enjoy living and learning through play;
- to enable the child to build good habits for effective living as an individual and a member of a group;
- to enable the child to appreciate his cultural background and customs;
- to foster the spiritual and moral growth of the child;
- to develop the child's imagination, self-reliance, and thinking skills;
- to enrich the child's experience so as to enable him/her to cope better with primary school.

There are two sections in the Guidelines. Section I includes notes to teachers on important issues like: understanding children, the child at school, general teaching methods, provision of material and equipment, organizing and arranging a classroom, programme of activities, and the school building and facilities. In Section II, pre-school activities, such as language development and pre-literacy activities, pre-number activities, environmental activities, social activities, pre-science activities, creative activities, art and craft, music, and outdoor and indoor activities are provided so that even teachers who have not gone through any training can have a good idea of what preschool learning is all about. However, while the guidelines serve as a curriculum in those schools with teachers trained through the national training programme, the majority of preschool teachers have not seen them, and therefore do not rely on the guidelines for assistance. (Currently there are over 26,625 preschool teachers—2/3rds of whom have not been trained—serving over 800,000 children.)

The Ideal Preschool. The ideal preschool provides for the all around development of children, namely stimulation—intellectual, physical, social, emotional and spiritual. The ideal school is a place where:

- Teachers believe that children come to them with a wealth of knowledge from home, knowledge upon which teachers need to build. This helps teachers to establish a warm relationship between school and home.
- Teachers are friendly, approachable, supportive, and ready to facilitate children's learning, while bearing in mind that learning takes place through interaction with an interested adult. This will only happen when teachers provide an informal and secure atmosphere.

- The school provides enough learning experiences and materials so that the children may explore their environment. Since the children are ready to find out about the world, they ask questions and relate experiences, they do things, they discover, they try out things and make their own decisions. They are supported by their teachers in all of these experiences.
- There are opportunities for children to mix and socialize freely with peers.
- Children are treated as individuals and thus their individual needs are taken care of. Their questions are always answered satisfactorily. They are not at any stage ridiculed.
- Children also learn to work in groups, and therefore teachers have prepared varied group activities so that children can learn to contribute to a joint outcome. Also, working in groups encourages peers to help others who may be having difficulty. The groups help teachers to identify group dynamics and leaders.

To sum up—when one enters an ideal preschool, one should find happy children fully involved in their activities [with murmurs] and have difficulty in spotting the teacher as she too should be fully engrossed working with a group in one corner of the classroom. This is an imaginative kind of a preschool!

Preschools in reality. Very few preschools fit this description, despite the KIE guidelines. This kind of preschool is the expectation, not the rule. The reality of the fact is that current preschool practice does not match this ideology. Instead of encouraging children to ask and answer questions, or attempting to interact with the children as much as possible, teachers spend a lot of time keeping children quiet and ridiculing them. This behaviour on the part of the teacher instills fear in the children and destroys their confidence. Most preschools in Kenya are run by teachers with firm ideas on discipline and behaviour. They have large enrollments, often with one class of up to 40 children to a single teacher, and little or no equipment or learning materials. Children have no opportunities to discover and explore or even move around the room.

Children from different communities undergo different types of preparation to enter state primary schools. The highly commercialized, private preschools use traditional teaching methods of repetition, recitation, and memorization, and lots of emphasis is placed on written tasks. Other private pre-schools with trained teachers are more flexible, with some effort toward play and activity-based methods. Other preschools are just providing a safe environment and nutritious food. In other words, they are just baby-sitting services. Most of the community based preschools with trained teachers using KIE guidelines are quite progressive in the sense that they provide a conducive learning atmosphere with a substantial amount of guided and free choice activities. Teachers are approachable and teach for the purpose. Sometimes they use traditional methods and sometimes child-centred methods; overall, they are flexible teachers.

The primary school. Primary schools in Kenya have gone through many changes since independence. There was a significant change from the 7-4-2-3 structure (7 years of primary education, 4 years of secondary education, 2 years of high school, 3 years of university education), to the 8-4-4 system (8 years of primary school, 4 years of secondary education and 4 years of university education). The 8-4-4 curriculum, established in 1985, brought about great changes in the methods used in the teaching/learning process and in the assessment of children.

More subjects were included in the curriculum content to cater to children who would continue on to secondary schools, as well as to those who would end their education at the primary level.

The 8-4-4 philosophy is to build self-reliant, patriotic, responsible individuals with critical thinking skills to serve the nation. Thus the subjects offered are both vocational and academic. The curriculum emphasizes active child participation in which children become partners in their learning and build upon their knowledge. The 8-4-4 curriculum encourages children to be independent. Teachers are expected to give children ways to find out things for themselves, to experiment, and to discover so that they act intelligently.

Teachers are the key to implementation of the curriculum. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes are very important and determine what they do in the classroom. The 8-4-4 system came into existence "overnight" and most teachers were not prepared for it. Many are not convinced of the value of participation and active learning. Teachers consider themselves to be knowledge transmitters through lectures and the use of chalkboards. They see children as passive receivers. In addition to inadequately prepared teachers, there are many other factors which have contributed to the ineffective implementation of the curriculum, for instance, the large class enrollments and the acute shortage of instructional materials and teaching aids.

Gaps between preschool and primary School. There are significant gaps between what happens in the preschool and what happens at the primary level on a number of dimensions. For example, in terms of curriculum, as set out by the Ministry of Education, the Standard 1 class has a total of 13 subjects, as compared to 6 subjects in preschool. The preschool subjects are mathematics, language, environmental studies, physical education, music, and creative art, while in Standard 1 the subjects are English language, Kiswahili, science, GHC combined, geography, history and civics, physical education, religious education, mathematics, music, mother tongue, and arts and crafts.

Another difference is in teacher attitudes and practices. It is difficult to find any degree of commitment or job satisfaction among primary school teachers, but there appears to be a substantial proportion of preschool teachers who are relatively committed to their job and derive some satisfaction in teaching and therefore continue, in spite of the constraints. Primary teachers are not practicing child-centred approaches. There have been very few changes in the classroom methodologies and learning processes despite what the 8-4-4 curriculum advocates. Schools in Kenya are what John Holt (1994) described as "a place where children learn to be stupid". Children are afraid to make mistakes and they lack confidence to trust their own perceptions. In contrast to this are the progressive preschool graduates who are not afraid of making mistakes. They are responsive, spontaneous, and quite confident in their answers.

Another dimension on which preschools and primary schools differ is in terms of level of formality. Regardless of the particular type of preschool, all preschools have some element of informality in their approach. Most preschoolers spend some time in free play, engage in lots of storytelling and songs, and in activities like sand and water play. But in Standard 1, children are introduced to a lot of written work. They are expected to sit still in their seats and be very quiet. The authoritative attitude of the teacher puts children off balance and creates a gap between

what children have gone through and what is expected of them. The two levels of learning are not only dissimilar, but they are also drastically inadequate, so that the gap created makes children coil into a shell or become unmanageable. This gap may be better illustrated by looking at the condition of the process, methods, and the curriculum used in preschools and in primary schools.

The major features in the preschool are free movement, a friendly teacher approach, and a positive attitude. There is also some flexibility from subject to subject. In some cases, one would find thematic learning. Individual needs are met because the teacher-student ratio is low. On the opposite end of the spectrum, in the primary schools, the teacher possesses an authoritative attitude, follows a subject-oriented teaching approach, and practices the rote learning methods already described. These methods may not only impair learning capabilities, but may also close the door of learning abilities in many children altogether.

The discrepancies between what children are expected to learn and know in preschool and in primary school result in either of the following scenarios: 1) inappropriate preschools and inappropriate primary schools, or 2) appropriate preschools and inappropriate primary schools. The fact is that strictly formal preschools prepare children to fit into the primary schools, which themselves are termed as inappropriate (because of the unpleasant classroom conditions, gloomy bare walls, and teacher-centred approaches, where teachers are spending much of the time rushing to cover the syllabus and complaining of the overloaded curriculum rather than finding ways of making learning interesting and providing meaningful learning!). On the other hand, the good, appropriate preschools with bright classrooms and lots of learning materials where child-centred approaches are practised do not necessarily prepare children for entrance into the primary school system.

What needs to be done. There is an urgent need to bridge the gap so that the good intentions of both the preschool and the primary school curriculum can produce the happy, reliant, and intelligent citizens to build the Kenyan Nation. There must be a conscious effort by the schools at both levels to recognize the gaps, and to be aware of some of the discrepancies between preschool and primary school that create undue stress on children. Some of the suggestions include:

- Orientation visits of the pre-primary (transit) class to the Standard 1 class and a tour of the whole school.
- Child-to-Child programmes in which senior children can come to the preschools and help preschool children in their activities, and then introduce them to the primary school.
- Efforts can be made to educate the masses on current education attitudes, e.g. participatory methods. The prevailing belief in Kenya is that learning only takes place in a classroom when learners are seated in rows facing a blackboard and instructed by teachers. The few teachers who practice child-centred methods are pressured by parents to change.
- Teacher training institutions should keep up to current thinking in education and instill new beliefs so that they become integrated into the fields. This means the teacher trainers themselves should have faith in emerging methodologies and keep up to date not only with methodologies, but with learning processes, material development, team working spirit, etc.

- Improving the attitudes of teachers so that teachers will stop groaning and complaining about overloaded curriculum, and other things. Instead teachers should be encouraged to find ways and means of improving practice and obtaining good results. Teacher training institutions should also encourage the use of the English language. A good example of the use of the English language in schools is our close neighbour Uganda. Children there are fluent and confident in speaking English from preschool on. A study showed that in Uganda the English language fluency helped students' achievement in both language and mathematics. Another good example in Uganda is the Minds Across Project (1988) where children were able to produce their own literature from their creative writing. In addition, training institutions should train teachers in the thematic or project learning system.
- The KIE should revise the primary school curriculum, with an aim toward integrating topics in several subject areas, for example 'water', which is repeated in practically all subjects—science, GHC (geography, history and civics), language, mathematics, etc. When a topic is introduced, it should be linked to all the other subjects. This will reduce time and thus ease the burden on the teacher.
- A preschool curriculum should be developed with specific objectives, activities, and methods to help teachers interpret the curriculum better. The caliber of teachers is such that their understanding level is quite low. Most of them are primary school dropouts or Form IV failures. More preschool teacher training facilities should be established.
- The government needs to introduce a policy that presents a reasonable salary scheme for preschool teachers.
- Primary schools should establish a system where the Standard 1 school teachers work with the transit teachers of the preschool. At present the transit teachers are preparing children for Standard 1 interviews by drilling them to prepare for the test for entrance to primary school.

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Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
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