
SITE VISIT: A Souvenir from Ethiopia—Bridging Preschool and Primary Education in Indonesia

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Through attendance at a meeting (The International Technical Consultation on the Early Learning Experiences of Children 0-6) sponsored by UNESCO in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in November of 1994, a researcher was given the tools to examine the issues surrounding transition present in her home country (Indonesia), to identify areas of need, and, finally, to offer specific practices which could be implemented in Indonesia in order to provide bridging supports to children moving from preschool into primary school.

Based on research findings and observations, sociologists have come to the conclusion that schools, especially formal schools, have directed children's focus away from their parents and their local environment. It has been shown that what children learn in school is quite different than what they learn in their immediate environment, especially what is learned from their parents and friends. As a result, many parents from certain social groups consider school a negative impact on their children's education and do not allow them to attend.

On the other hand, many parents who do send their children to primary school raise such questions as: Why is subject matter so heavily emphasized? How come my children no longer like going to school after they start learning at primary education? Why could they learn by playing in preschool, and now, after they are in primary education, there are so many subjects to be learned?

These grievances indicate that there are significant discrepancies between preschool and primary education. The following are some of the noted differences in learning approaches between preschool and elementary education.

- The learning principle implemented in preschool is that of learning by playing, as well as playing by learning. Meanwhile in primary education, there is no distinct principle. However, it might be appropriate to label the primary education principle as "learning is hard", but even that would be arguable.

- "Subject matter" is a term which is not applicable for preschool. At this level children learn according to their own developmental stages. In the primary school, however, children are forced to become familiar with things like times tables when they are in their 1st year.
- The integrative approach is mostly applied in preschool, while a subject-based approach is used in primary education.

While each of these approaches has its own merits, it is necessary to provide some continuity between them. Since preschool children are likely to continue on to primary school, they should be given time to adjust to the new environment, as well as to new methods of learning. The first year of primary school is really very difficult for new students, especially those who are only 6 or 7 years old, many of whom are in different stages of development. If the representative education coordinators (especially teachers) do not tackle this issue carefully, it might result in negative consequences, such as a child being reluctant to go to school, or worse, it might cause a setback in the child's developmental progress. If children are moved abruptly from an enjoyable learning environment into a totally different environment which requires them to memorize, to calculate, and to read and write in order to fulfill a predetermined and rigid set of expectations, the effects on the children can be disastrous. For some children these fast changes are certainly a heavy burden.

These two problems (i.e., formal education which alienates children from their environment, and the enormous differences between preschool and primary education) have become an issue of great concern in years I and II of primary education. Thus, there should be some way of bridging these gaps if we really want a kind of "earthly" education, that is, an education that will be useful in solving the social, economic, and cultural problems of a nation, and not an "ivory tower". Having come to this realization, we should also be aware that children's education should be adjusted to their needs, conditions, and potentialities, as well as to the needs of the respective society.

The bridge. I was lucky to have had the chance to attend the meeting conducted by UNESCO in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in November of 1994. The purpose of the meeting, the International Technical Consultation on the Early Learning Experiences of Children 0-6, was to look for alternatives in the teaching-learning process which could bridge formal education at the primary level and prior education, namely preschool education. The meeting was actually the continuation of a research and development activity which had been conducted by 5 countries: India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Ethiopia, and Egypt. The meeting's aim was to make participants aware of the importance of educational activities that bridge formal and any previous education—either that taking place through preschool or in the home.

From my experience, it seems that in order to build the bridge in Indonesia, some adjustments need to be made in the Indonesia educational system, not at the preschool level but at year I primary level and, if possible, year II. Since the existing preschools are not designed to prepare learners entering the primary school, and since preschools are not mandatory (less than 50% of children attend), if changes were made at the preschool level, only a few children would benefit.

The Addis Ababa meeting provided many suggestions on building bridges between preschool and primary school, which, in my opinion, would not be difficult to implement in Indonesia. The suggestions are:

A special training for teachers of Years I and II primary education. This training would be aimed at building an awareness of the importance of taking care of children who newly enter primary education, while at the same time increasing teacher ability to apply different methods in the teaching-learning process. Obviously, the training should be very specific and in accordance with the needs of year I and II primary education teachers.

The child's mother tongue should be the language of instruction in years I and II. Using their first language will clearly facilitate children's learning comprehension, as well as provide them with a connection to their home environment. These implications certainly have a broad meaning for a country such as Indonesia. It should be understood that more than 50% of children in years I and II use the Indonesian language in the classroom, which, for them, is a foreign language. Theoretically, children should begin to read and write by using a familiar language, which in this case, is their first language. However, the national curriculum states that teachers of years I and II should provide instruction in the Indonesian language. One of the methods in early reading and writing applied by most teachers and most student textbooks asks for a higher understanding of the language than many children possess. Consequently, through research, the conclusion has been reached that there are a lot of children who have not been able to learn to read and write with the appropriate tools. Thus there is necessity of building a bridge.

Individual services need to be provided for children in years I and II. This is important because, upon entering school, each child has his or her own specific abilities, and many of these differ from one child to the next. There could be many children who are already fluent in reading and writing, and other children who are not familiar with any letters at all. These two groups of children study together in the same class, yet it does not make sense for them to use the same materials. There are more instances where this kind of discrepancy might arise in the classroom, such as with differences in language, arithmetic, and physical ability. It would be appropriate to include a program in the teacher training which addresses these individual differences.

There is a need to lessen the teaching burden (load) of teachers in primary education, years I and II. This would allow teachers to concentrate more fully on the teaching of early reading, writing, and arithmetic. Additionally, teachers also need to acquire teaching skills in areas such as music, art, and sports.

Year I teachers should be familiar with the students' educational background and abilities prior to entering primary school. This information is absolutely necessary for teachers to better understand each student and his or her capabilities, and subsequently to provide appropriate activities according to individual ability. Examples of student reading ability would be a good way to put this important information to use. This could be organized by the school in several ways. For example, reports could be written up on the reading abilities of year I primary students who have attended preschool, allowing primary teachers to adjust the reading curriculum to individual student levels. Following this, preschool teachers would need to write

reports with the needs of year I primary teachers in mind. For learners who come from an environment other than preschool, interviews could be conducted with year I teachers and parents—either in the home or in school.

Teaching/learning tools need to be provided which can accommodate individual needs and conditions. If it is discovered that children are keen on playing with leaves, stones, seeds, or bamboo, teachers should use these materials in the teaching-learning process. It would also be beneficial if teachers introduced local dances, games, musical instruments, and traditional celebrations into the process of learning. This will help children to feel closer to their home environments and will help prevent alienation from parents and society.

There is a need to build harmonious relationships between teachers and parents. There should be at least 3 meetings per year between teachers and parents. Parents should also be asked to participate in educating their children at home. Because of the large number of students in one classroom, it is impossible for teachers to provide appropriate attention to each child; therefore parental involvement is essential. Keeping in mind that learning to read and building vocabulary are ongoing processes needing consistent reinforcement, teachers should involve parents by asking them to read books brought home from school by their children. Moreover, parents can teach children by pointing things out, things from the world around them, like a cat giving birth, a hen laying an egg, a trip to the market, etc., all which provide learning experiences outside the classroom. This could certainly be done at home, without any cost to the parent.

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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.