
SITE VISIT: Preparing Children for School in the Philippines

Based on two documents provided by the Department of Education and Sports (DECS), titled, "The Summer School Program" and "Integration of Early childhood Experiences in Grade I"; a document prepared by Dr. L. Luis-Santos, Director III of the Bureau of Elementary Education of the DECS, titled, "ADECS ECCD Program," and profiting from conversations with Feny de los Angeles Bautista.

In the Philippines they have been experimenting with ways to prepare children for primary school through the integration of early childhood education into the existing school system. The ECD program that has evolved illustrates the potential for moving early childhood teaching methods into the first grade of schooling, and for helping children adjust to and perform better upon entry into primary school. It also demonstrates some of the difficulties in trying to introduce ECD into elementary education, particularly when first grade classes are large, when teachers have not been properly oriented, and when there is an overwhelming tradition of formalized instruction.

Recognizing the need for and importance of preschool education, the Philippine Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS) in 1971 issued a policy document encouraging the school division to establish public preschool classes whenever possible. Since that time, public preschools have been provided, adding to the many private preschools already in existence.

In January 1995, a survey was conducted to assess the preschools implemented by DECS. One of the conclusions of the survey was that Government cannot afford to provide preschools in all parts of the country. Thus, in March 1995, DECS issued the following statement on early childhood education which affirms the importance of preschool but states that preschools should be developed by the community to provide early childhood development experiences for 5-year old-children before they enter Grade 1.

To provide children...the benefits of preschool education, the concept of preschool as a structured system must give way to a system which is community based. A community-based preschool will be an alternative technology that will be set up in the disadvantaged areas to give early childhood development experiences to 5-year old children before they go to grade I. It is a community-based nonprofit school which will be established through a collaborative partnership of DECS, NGOs, Local Government Units (LGUs) and agents.

In addition to this movement toward locally-sponsored preschools, DECS has put considerable emphasis on the issue of school readiness, exploring different methods of better preparing children for school, and then keeping them in school. A study reported on in 1995 (Heaver and Hunt) brought to light some disheartening statistics regarding the effectiveness of primary education in the Philippines. A high dropout rate was found to be prevalent in the first and

second grades, accounting for 60% of total primary school dropouts. In addition, national achievement tests indicated performance in the earlier grades at below 50% of the norm. These findings resulted in concerns about such issues as quality of education, dropout rates, and school readiness. A World Bank study, which showed that children from poor areas who do not attend preschool have an 18% drop-out rate, while the rate for those who do attend preschool is 12%, prompted the Bureau of Elementary Education (within DECS) to explore and implement programs that would provide preschool education to all children, and assist them in making the transition from home to school.

Prior to 1995, Philippine children entered the primary school at age 7. A majority of these children entered school without having had the opportunity to go to preschools. Recognizing that many children enter school at a definite disadvantage, the Government of the Philippines, with assistance from UNICEF, experimented in 1991 with a 6-week summer preschool program designed to improve socialization and "readiness" skills for children 6.5 to 7 years of age. Although the results of the Summer Preschool Program were moderately positive, budget constraints prevented continuation and expansion of the program. As a result, it was decided to incorporate early childhood experiences into the curriculum of Grade I. The experiences and outcomes of these two programmes follow.

The Summer Preschool Program. This experimental program, carried out in seven schools in each of three regions of the country, was explicitly intended to help bridge the gap between home and school by providing children with interesting and motivating activities in an enriching environment. In all, 583 children from low income municipalities participated in the six-week, full-day program. Teachers were oriented to a special early childhood program (Learning Competencies for Preschoolers) and were provided with instructional materials (manipulative toys, blocks, activity sheets, poems, jingles, rhymes, and songs).

To evaluate the results of the program, readiness tests in Filipino, Mathematics and Mental Ability were administered to children who had participated in the summer school program and to a comparative group of children who had not participated in the program and who had no preschool background. When mean scores for the two groups were compared using t-tests, a significant difference was found for all three tests, favouring the preschoolers. The significance level was highest for mathematics. When the results were disaggregated by region, significant results were found for two regions, but not a third.

Overall, however, this six-week programme met with mixed success. On the positive side, teachers who received the children after this experience were enthusiastic about the children's readiness for school. And in a follow-up study, the dropout rate for children who had been in the summer preschool was 1%, compared to the 15% for those children without the summer class. The drawbacks included the fact that teachers were not compensated for this apart from their regular salaries, so they were dissatisfied; parents had vacation plans that were interrupted by this schedule; and it was too hot.

Because of the positive benefits, DECS wanted to continue to provide the readiness activity, but not during the summer. They then experimented with the integration of ECD into grade one.

Early Childhood Experiences for Grade I. Beginning in the 1992-93 school year, an experiment was carried out in which the curriculum of the summer preschool program was moved into the first four weeks of the school year. The experiment was implemented in 66 classes in six regions of the country. Feedback from the teachers suggested that the curriculum was useful and the activities challenging, interesting, and enjoyable for the children. These encouraging results led to extension of the program to eight weeks in 1993-94, and to implementation in a larger number of classes and areas. DECS Central Office initiated training for teachers of public school kindergartens (referred to as "school-based ECD") in preparation for the opening of 1,428 classes in October, 1993.

An evaluation of the expanded program indicated that parents were supportive, that the materials were helpful, and that the curriculum helped to prepare children better for their grade I work.

During the 1994-95 school year, the program was expanded further to include 30,375 pupils in 15 regions, with a total of 675 Grade I classes participating. In addition, a 2-week trainers' training course was conducted in November 1994 with the regional and division supervisors as participants. There are now 48 supervisors who have conducted one-week or weekend training programs for the teachers in their divisions.

In 1995, Early Childhood Experiences for Grade I was institutionalized at the same time as the official age for entry into primary school was dropped to six years of age. All Grade I teachers were requested to implement the eight-week curriculum and gradually move to the regular Grade I curriculum. Monitoring of the institutionalization of the Early Childhood Experiences conducted in 176 classes in 22 divisions during June and July of 1995 indicated the following:

- Most teachers had undergone a training program of 1 to 3 days, but the length of the training was thought by many to be too short.
- The curriculum guide was generally thought to be helpful and age-appropriate but brought with it extra work, and the teaching aids were sometimes inadequate.
- Most teachers followed the suggested schedule of activities.
- Some teachers were apprehensive that the 8-week curriculum would infringe on their budget of time to work on Grade One curriculum.
- Some teachers did not implement the 8-week curriculum because they thought their students were ready for Grade I work, they had not been given an orientation, they were worried about covering the Grade I materials, or the classes were too large.

One of the concerns which has surfaced in regard to the curriculum is that it is too close to formal elementary school approaches.

Comment. The model has evolved. There is now an eight-week curriculum (6 weeks of preschools plus 2 weeks of transition) that is introduced during the initial months of Grade 1. The program has been implemented in 15 regions covering 52 divisions. With the lowering of the entrance age to six years beginning 1995-1996, the program is relevant and necessary, especially

since preschool education is not yet available to all children at age four and five. The eight week preschool curriculum helps to ease the transition into the formal and structured Grade 1 classroom.

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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.