

**CHAPTER 4—TRANSITIONS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE MAJORITY WORLD**

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### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, young children make many transitions in their lives, from the family to the wider community, and from the community to primary school. They may or may not participate in an early childhood program as part of this transition process. While a great deal has been written about these transitions for children and families in the minority world, far less attention has been accorded to children in the majority world. This chapter addresses children for whom our conventional understandings of transition have been overlooked and for whom new meaning may be accorded to the construct. The term *majority world* is used in this chapter in preference to terms such as *developing world* or *Third World* due to the disparaging or outdated connotations sometimes associated with these terms and the implication that wealthy countries have somehow finished developing. The term also highlights the fact that the majority of the world's population lives in these countries.

### BACKGROUND

Why is it important to consider children's transitions in the majority world? The answer is quite simply that this is the period when systems fail children the most and which is most urgently in need of attention. Early transitions in children's lives represent critical points which are key opportunities for children's growth and learning, but also precarious times of risk and vulnerability. They lay the foundation for lifelong growth and development (Entwistle & Alexander, 1998), and yet how they are experienced by young children varies greatly across contexts.

Until very recently there has been limited attention to transition<sup>1</sup> issues in the majority world. The increasing attention to this area is being prompted by three things:

1. Better analysis of data demonstrating that the major crisis in education is right at the beginning of primary school. Donors' and national governments' attention has been focused on completion of primary school which remains dismal in many countries. Completion is a key goal within the Millennium Development and Education for All Goals (MDG and EFA, respectively) yet there is little attention to where education efforts break down. Recent analysis of grade disaggregated data demonstrates high drop-out and repetition rates in Grade 1 as well as the establishment of persistent patterns of underachievement from early on (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2006; UNESCO, 2005, 2006, 2008).

2. The powerful evidence from minority and majority world countries alike regarding the efficacy of early childhood development (ECD) programs in improving enrollment, retention, and achievement along with a host of much broader social and economic benefits. These benefits are particularly pronounced for disadvantaged and excluded children.

3. A better understanding of the devastating consequences of the combination of a lack of good supports for early childhood development (including but not limited to access to ECD programs) and the lack of specific attention to the early years of primary school across most majority world countries.

Notions of readiness and transition are closely related in all parts of the world. This chapter looks at children's readiness for school in the majority world and the key factors underlying this. Equally important, it looks at schools' readiness for children and what happens right at the beginning of primary school that assists or undermines children's transition into school. Some of the similarities and differences between majority and minority world countries, as well as across the immense diversity of the majority world, are drawn out and an overarching rights framework for early transition proposed. A number of questions are posed which, while

particularly applicable to the majority world, may also resonate for many minority world countries:

1. Why is it that, despite the internationally accepted definition of the early years as 0-8, early childhood professionals and policymakers ignore 6- to 8-year-olds, limiting their focus to the preschool years?

2. Why isn't more happening within the large-scale education sector reform and school improvement programs to ensure a welcoming environment and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for children during those vital early years of formal school?

3. How can we conceptualize and implement work differently so that deliberately linked ECD and early primary components are part of a whole and there is continuity of good practices and learning?

The concepts of *ready children*, *ready families*, and *ready schools* that have been used by many (OECD, 2006; Kids Count, 2005; Boethel, 2004; Myers, 1997) are helpful in minority and majority contexts alike. However, much of the research and discussion in the majority world related to transition has been uneven in terms of how all three pieces (children, families and schools) are addressed. Recently, a good deal of attention has been placed on getting children ready for school through increasing the number of organized early childhood programs. This is understandable and much needed given the limited access to ECD programs. However, given the broader reach of primary education, the lack of serious attention to schools being ready for children beyond generalized notions of "child friendliness" has been a significant gap. Equally, there needs to be more attention to the contexts in which families are operating and the ways in which these can better support and enable families to provide vital support for their children's overall development, including assisting them with their transitions.

Over the last 3 or 4 years there has been an encouraging growth in awareness of and action on these issues. New research and a growing range of initiatives and discussions across many countries are underway and expanding. Efforts to increase access to early childhood services and improve supports for lower primary grades in a coordinated way are promising. Some of these are highlighted in “Is Everybody Ready?” (Arnold et al., 2006), with examples from international agencies including the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Save the Children, Open Society Institute, UNICEF, and the Aga Khan Foundation among others. Still, there is much to be done—and urgently—for the millions of children who from an early point in life are not offered the range of supports that will facilitate their growth, development and wellbeing.

## **MAJORITY WORLD CONTEXT FOR TRANSITION**

### **Overall Trends**

International economic and political trends—such as increasing disparities between rich and poor, migration for work, the move away from extended families, increasingly heavy workloads for girls and women, globalization, the transition from planned to market economies, armed conflict and HIV/AIDS—affect every aspect of young children’s lives. Families face fundamental struggles in surviving and thriving, and have inequitable (or no) access to a range of needed services and supports for their young children.

**Poverty** Around the world poverty has a profound and negative impact on the realization of children’s rights. Children’s lives, and thus their early transitions, are negatively influenced by poverty—not just by inadequate income, but also the marginalization, exclusion, and disempowerment so integral to poverty. Within families, communities, and countries, a lack of resources undermines the capacity to provide sufficiently for children, and to afford them opportunities to thrive. For families this includes challenges in providing adequate food and

shelter. It is also very much about a lack of access to education, health, and other social services and supports for their young children. Even where families are not effectively excluded from local services, these services are often woefully inadequate and may have neither competent staff in attendance nor supplies of basic medicines or learning materials.

Even families' day-to-day interactions are constrained by lack of resources. There may be little time to simply enjoy talking and playing with children in a comfortable and safe environment. In a life of grinding poverty adults feel little sense of agency or control, and it is not surprising that the most disadvantaged families feel powerless to promote their children's best interests.

Poverty serves to compound other problems. Natural disasters are far more devastating for families already living in flimsy housing. Similarly, poor families are the most vulnerable when armed conflict erupts (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2009).

Poverty is a serious risk factor everywhere (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). In countries such as the U.S., Canada, Japan, and those in Western Europe, poverty, exclusion, and marginalization (due to lack of economic opportunities or to discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, race or gender) have a consistent negative impact on children's lives in terms of their health, sense of self, access to and success in school, and overall wellbeing (OECD, 2006). While poverty is widespread and disparities are increasing in wealthier countries, the prevalence of absolute poverty is at another level in the majority world.

In majority world countries deep poverty is pervasive. A child in Sub-Saharan Africa has a 4 out of 10 chance of living on less than one dollar a day (United Nations, 2007). In South Asia, the likelihood is 3 out of 10. Such widespread and extreme poverty has a profound impact

on virtually all aspects of the experience of vast numbers of (and in some places most) children. The difficulties faced by these families are different in scale and nature, and are severely exacerbated by a serious lack of functioning infrastructure and services. Notions of ready children and ready families, and what these mean in terms of transitions, unfold in critically distinct ways in such a context, extending well beyond the role of preschool programs (which usually do not exist) in preparing children for the academic and social aspects of primary school.

**Health and Nutrition** Poor health and malnutrition are facts of life for many children in low-income countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, more than 40% of children under 5 are physically stunted (Chabbott, 2006). The ground-breaking Lancet series on Child Development in Developing Countries (2007) highlights the fact that 200 million children under 5 fail to reach their developmental potential due to poverty, poor health (respiratory diseases, malaria, parasites) and nutrition, inadequate levels of micro-nutrients, and inadequate care (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). Chronically malnourished children have more difficulty adjusting to, performing in, and progressing through school (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007; Ames, Rojas, & Portugal, 2009). The effects are both immediate and long-term (Bartlett, 2009). Children who are sick or malnourished lack the energy and interest to be active learners (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). Those affected at an earlier age have been found repeatedly to demonstrate later cognitive deficits, along with lower school achievement and higher drop-out rates—the impacts of which extend throughout the school years and beyond (Walker et al., 2007; The Lancet, 2007; Sakti et al., 1999). For families with children affected by HIV/AIDs, supports may be minimal to non-existent and the consequences catastrophic (O’Gara & Lusk, 2002). Furthermore, a growing body of literature demonstrates how poverty-related stress erodes the

cognitive capacity of children and impacts the physiology of brain development, especially where poverty is of long duration (Farah, Noble & Hurt, 2005).

A large percentage of young children and their families thus face significant challenges in successfully managing transitions during the early childhood years. These include: (a) a lack of adequate resources within home and community contexts; (b) poor access to and quality of health and ECD programs; (c) inadequate access to and quality of primary school; and (d) ineffectiveness of linkages between home, school, and community. All of these factors directly impact children's developmental trajectories from their earliest years.

### **ECD Services in the Majority World**

**The Benefits** It is now understood how key ECD programs can be in countering the challenges outlined above. Investments in ECD offer outstanding returns—both in human and financial terms. Numerous studies have demonstrated improvements in education, health, social development, and economic growth indicators attributable to ECD (Barnett, 1998; Kagitcibasi, Unar & Beckman, 2001; Engle et al., 2007). The World Bank and leading economists such as the Nobel laureate Heckman, conclude that, “well targeted ECD programs cost less and produce more dramatic and lasting results than education investments at any other level” (van der Gaag, 2002, pp.74-75). ECD programs help reduce the social and economic disparities and gender inequalities that divide societies and perpetuate poverty and are preferable to costly remedial action.

An analysis of the correlation between preschool enrollment and primary completion and repetition rates in 133 countries provides a strong case for placing higher priority on ECD in education sector discussions (Mingat & Jaramillo, 2003). The authors found completion rates of 50% in the absence of preschool, and around 80% where half the children have access to some

sort of preschool or ECD center. With regard to repetition, they found absence of preschool experience correlated with 25% repetition whereas preschool enrollment of 45% correlated with a reduction of repetition to 12%. Controlling for GDP made little difference in the analysis.

**Enrollment in ECD programs** What does the enrollment picture in the majority world look like? Access to relevant, quality early childhood supports—whether formal or informal—remains problematic across most majority world countries. There are a few notable exceptions. Cuba is one such positive example where near full participation in a range of ECD programs beginning before birth and targeting children and parents lead to Cuban third graders significantly outperforming their counterparts in much wealthier surrounding countries (Tinajero, 2009).

Most data focuses on enrollment in pre-primary classes rather than a broader range of ECD services, especially those serving children aged 0-3. Having said this, data available in the Global Monitoring Report paint a bleak picture. The 2009 EFA Global Monitoring Report states that pre-primary gross enrollment ratio (GER) is 36% for developing countries, 79% for developed countries, and 62% for countries in transition (p. 51).

Breakdown by region is even more telling. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), although numbers of children enrolled in an ECD program are up by 43%, the pre-primary GER is just 14%. In practice, this means 86% of children are entering school with no preschool experience. More than half the SSA countries report GER of less than 10%; in Mali, it is just 3%. In South Asia, pre-primary GER stands at 39% (up significantly from 21% in 1999). Yet in countries like Afghanistan it is less than 1%. In Latin America, where the regional GER for preschool is 65%, the differences between countries continue. In Cuba, virtually all children attend preschool, but

only 29% do in Guatemala. In the Arab States, GER is only 18%, and SSA saw better growth in GER between 1999 and 2006 than the Arab States.

**Failure to Reach Disadvantaged Children** Global disparities are mirrored in wide gaps within countries, especially between the richest and poorest children. In some countries, such as Syria, Mongolia, and Kyrgyzstan, children from the wealthiest 20% of households are at least 5 times more likely to attend preschool programs than those from the poorest 20%. The table below using data from the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009 (p. 54) highlights these stark disparities.

<<<Insert Table 1>>>

Children from low-income households with low parental education levels in Ethiopia, Peru, Vietnam, and India (in the state of Andhra Pradesh) are much less likely to be in preschool than their better-off counterparts (Woodhead et al., in press; Ames, Rojas, & Portugal, 2009). Fees and other “hidden costs” often make it difficult for low-income families to send their children. In Vietnam, while 65% of urban children have access to ECD services, only 36% of rural children do (Young Lives, 2007). In Ethiopia the situation is even worse—the equivalent figures being 58% (urban) and 4% (rural).

In terms of minority world examples, France and most Scandinavian countries have near universal preschool enrollment, where ECD services are often an entitlement. In contrast, in the United States ECD services are not universal and only 45% of poor children are enrolled in preschool education compared to 75% from high-income families (UNESCO, 2008).

Rates of participation in ECD programs may also be characterized by gender disparities. Girls, especially in rural areas, face unique barriers to accessing preschool education in some countries (Woodhead et al., in press). Gender discrimination may begin before birth, with high

rates of abortion of female fetuses in some Asian countries. It may also lead to disparities in feeding practices (with boys receiving more and better quality food) and healthcare seeking behaviors. On a more positive note, UNESCO statistics (2008) indicate that overall gender disparities in ECD enrollment tend to be minor in most countries. Furthermore, there is evidence from that ECD can be an effective strategy for promoting greater gender equity in primary school, seen in Nepal (Save the Children, 2003; UNESCO, 2003/4).

The evidence from UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) used in its 2006 State of the World's Children Report, and a UNESCO and UNICEF report (2005), point to the same conclusion regarding disparities in access: children from the most marginalized backgrounds are considerably less likely to access ECD programs although they have been repeatedly shown to benefit the most (Arnold et al., 2006; UNESCO, 2006).

Across minority and majority world contexts, the failure to reach disadvantaged children is extremely worrisome. Despite the fact that EFA Goal 1 specifically prioritizes services for "the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children," in reality it is largely the wealthy who succeed in accessing the limited opportunities available, including when these are public and free.

**Reliability of Data** Data indicating access to ECD programs and supports are not always reliable. For example, governments may under-report non-state provision of ECD services—especially where these are informal and the government has no coordinating role. Non-state provision (both through Civil Society Organizations and private providers) is, in fact, often a major source of ECD services in the majority world, estimated at approximately half (49%). In sub-Saharan Africa the figure is 53% (GMR, 2009).

What makes this more complex is that non-state provision includes a diverse set of providers, including very small local community development organizations, individually owned preschools, private for-profit preschools, faith-based preschools, and early childhood centers supported by local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Aga Khan Foundation, 2007). In other words, private provision does not necessarily mean expensive and exclusive provision for wealthy parents. Many of the NGO services, in fact, target excluded, poor families, though virtually all must depend on charging fees and seeking in-kind and other supports from local communities. Botswana, Congo, Gambia, Lesotho, Togo, Uganda, Madagascar, Namibia, and Ethiopia all report a very high percentage of their pre-primary enrollments in private programs—at 90% or more (UNESCO, 2008).

**Quality** In addition to generally very poor access to early childhood programs, there is inequity in access to quality services (Woodhead et al., 2009). This is particularly worrying given that a small but growing body of research from the majority world is showing, not surprisingly, that higher quality ECD environments result in better outcomes for children—often both cognitive and psycho-social (Aboud, 2006; Aboud et al., 2008; Moore, Akhter & Aboud, 2008; Mwaura, 2008). Critical here is that improving quality requires the availability of an array of learning materials for children to use, and in-depth work with ECD teachers to help them apply new ideas and knowledge regarding support for children’s cognitive and psycho-social development in the classroom (Moore et al., 2007). This is very different than what is often given priority in policy discussions: raising the formal education requirements for ECD teachers rather than working with local people, providing regular training and mentoring from skilled supervisors. Culturally appropriate training of local ECD staff who speak the children’s language and are known (and often selected) by parents, along with provision of sufficient

relevant teaching and learning materials, lies at the heart of quality programs operating in the majority world.

Yet as ECD policies get formalized and the field of ECD becomes professionalized there are both intended and unintended consequences. Some of the unintended consequences can lead to poor and marginalized communities becoming further disadvantaged. There is much discussion around increasing standards for ECD staff qualifications—most often measured through formal (accredited) courses specified in new policies across majority world countries. While this may often have positive results in terms of the learning opportunities for children, the situation is complex.

These qualification requirements can be problematic, particularly when they do not acknowledge practical work experience with young children and when their implications are not fully considered. Local people in remote rural villages or urban slums may simply not have the required qualifications, resulting either in serious service gaps or the recruitment of outsiders who may not understand the local culture or speak the language. Local communities or NGOs that have been operating ECD activities may not be able to register because they do not meet new requirements or are unable to afford the costs associated with getting registered (including transport to a larger urban center and spending days trying to work through the process). While they may be closely attuned to local values and expressed needs, and may be delivering valuable services, they are rarely validated within the emerging “professional” requirements.

**Failure to Provide Adequate Resources for ECD** Low enrollment rates signify a massive failure on the part of both national governments and international organizations to provide adequate financial resources for ECD. The Creditor Reporting System Aid Activity Database (IDS, 2009) (table accessed May 28th, 2009) indicates that:

- Average annual aid to ECD (1999-2007) from bilateral and multilateral donor agencies (e.g., the UN, Western countries' development aid agencies) was \$44 million.
- Average annual aid to primary education (1999-2007) was \$2,266 million.

Thus donor support to ECD as a percentage of support to primary education was just 1.9% (Note this information is mostly grants and does not include the significant World Bank loans<sup>2</sup> for ECD). However, there are of course problems in trying to estimate ECD investment. It may, for example, be hidden within basic education or broad social sector support as a sub-area of work. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the resources allotted to ECD are wholly inadequate.

### **ADDRESSING TRANSITIONS IN THE MAJORITY WORLD**

Given the enormous benefits of ECD programs for children's successful transition (and therefore for meeting EFA and poverty reduction goals), a top priority must be to increase funds allocated to ECD—both in national budgets and by donors. Meanwhile, it is vital also to respond effectively to the reality, highlighted above, that only a small percentage of children and families have access to ECD programs of any kind. This means that the major transition for the vast majority of children in low-income countries is from their home to primary school. As such, it becomes even more critical to look at what happens as children enter Grade 1 and move through their initial primary school years. As will be seen in the next section, this transition period is highly precarious, with large numbers of children simply never making it through more than a few months or a year. We are faced with the urgent challenge of ensuring that primary schools are ready for children, ALL children, whether or not they are “ready for school.” It is critical that schools are enabled to play an active and positive role throughout this important transition period.

For a school to be “ready” for children, it must develop an environment in which all children feel a sense of belonging and are able to learn. This means that teachers must be welcoming and appreciative of children’s efforts, ensure their safety and sense of security, and provide learning opportunities that enable children to interact effectively with their world.

While a school’s readiness to provide a positive learning environment has an important impact for all children, this is greatly magnified for younger children entering school for the first time. How young girls and boys fare, how they feel in the early days and weeks, how they are viewed and treated as learners is critical. It can be a time of stress, anxiety, and insecurity or it can be a time of anticipation, new friends and challenges, enjoyment of learning, and confidence.

#### **Access to Primary Education—The First Gate**

Access to primary education has increased dramatically in recent years in the majority world with a primary GER of 106% and an NER of 85% (UNESCO, 2008). The change is significant considering the traditionally low levels of enrollment across much of the majority world and especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Yet while the vast majority of children now enroll in school, many do not complete the primary cycle. An estimated 75 million primary age children do not complete primary school either because they drop out or they never have the chance to enroll in school (Save the Children, 2009). The same inequities which exclude so many from ECD programs conspire against children enrolling and staying in school: family income, maternal education, geography (including distance to school), gender, and minority status (e.g., ethnic, religious).

Various in-school factors such as inadequate teaching, irrelevant curriculum, poor or non-existent infrastructure, and a lack of learning materials can undermine young students’ confidence and enthusiasm for learning from the start. These are analyzed further in the sections

below. In addition, conflict and violence within schools and communities, entrenched cultural biases (e.g. attitudes to girls and women), as well as factors such as distance to school impact parents' decision-making around whether and when to allow their children to enroll and attend classes.

For numerous children, even those as young as 5 or 6, a transition to school must compete with other possibilities such as assistance in the household's livelihood and survival strategies. This may mean helping to care for younger siblings, watching over the family livestock, collecting firewood and water, and chasing wild animals away from the family agricultural plots. However, across the majority world disadvantaged families are increasingly aware of the importance of education and the possibilities it may offer children to break out of poverty. If children are seen to be learning, families will often make great sacrifices to keep them in school.

This makes it all the more disturbing that such vast numbers of children who do enter school drop out before completing the primary grades. In Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, one third of pupils leave school before they even reach Grade 5 (UNESCO, 2008). Completion rates have changed little in countries such as Uganda despite massive increases in initial enrollment. In order to address these challenges effectively it is vital to know the point at which children are dropping out. When is it that the system fails them?

### **Drop-out, Repetition, and Under-achievement: The Crisis in Early Primary Undermining Successful Transition**

In Uganda one third (32%) of children who enroll in school drop out during their first year (UNESCO, 2007). Analysis of grade-disaggregated data demonstrates beyond doubt that the real crisis is in the early years. Drop-out rates are highest in Grade 1 as evidenced by the

data in recent Global Monitoring Reports (UNESCO, 2005, 2006, 2008). In many countries, high levels of drop-out are often combined with even worse repetition rates. In Guinea-Bissau, Rwanda, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, and Nepal, more than half the children who enroll either repeat first grade or drop-out (Arnold et al., 2006). Where drop-out information is available by grade, Grade 1 drop-out rates are usually at least double those in Grade 2. For example, in South Asia, children are three times more likely to drop out of Grade 1 as compared to Grade 4. Even in Latin America, where good progress towards the EFA goals had been made, there are areas with poor outcomes: 19% of children dropped out in Colombia before completing Grade 1, and 31% in Belize repeated Grade 1. Additional and often stark disparities exist within countries such as India where Grade 1 drop-out rates range from 2% in Kerala to 21% in Rajasthan (Arnold et al., 2006).

Of those who stay, many more repeat classes and become established in persistent patterns of underachievement, leaving school unable to read fluently, calculate, or problem-solve. Millions of children leave school without having attained basic literacy and numeracy skills. For example, a study of students' ability to read a simple sentence by Grade 5 found that in Peru the figure was just 18% for girls and boys alike, and in Ghana it was 19% for boys and only 12% for girls (Gilles & Quijada, 2008). National assessments in Uganda indicated that 46% of third graders are not reaching expected levels of competency in literacy (National Assessment of Progress in Primary Education, 2006). Along the same lines, a survey of learning achievement in 549 districts in India found that 47% of Grade 5 children could not read a story text at a Grade 2 level of difficulty (Pratham, 2007). The ability to read affects students' later progress across all subject areas—and thus the likelihood of a successful transition through early primary and into subsequent years of school.

In sum then, repetition and failure to learn stops or severely stymies children's successful transition. The next section focuses on and starts to unpack some of the in-school factors contributing to this dire situation in which schools routinely fail the very children they have been established to serve. It highlights the need for focused attention on the neglected early primary classes.

### **What Happens in School**

The most powerful determinant of children's successful transition in majority world countries is what actually goes on within the classroom—the way teachers teach and how much they teach. However, the physical environment can have a profound impact on transitions through its direct effects on factors such as attention, concentration, behavior, and comfort as well as through its effect on social interaction. This section therefore starts with a brief look at one particular aspect of the physical environment, class size, before going on to examine several aspects of quality of teaching and instruction children experience in school.

**Class Size** In some of the poorest countries (particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa), the number of children in one classroom during the first year of primary school has mushroomed, reaching 100 or more (Abadzi, 2006). The learning environment in many Grade 1 classes is thus extremely challenging. Very large class sizes impede teachers' ability to teach and children's ability to learn (Gilles & Quijada, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2006), especially in the earliest years. Classes which may already have issues around ventilation, light, warmth, noise, and the most basic furniture are now seriously overcrowded. One teacher is faced with trying to provide meaningful learning opportunities for far too many children, often confronting an extreme range of ages and abilities, a lack of seating space, and a dire shortage of learning materials (Arnold et al., 2006; Gilles & Quijada, 2008).

**Teacher Competence** Teacher competence is a multi-dimensional construct—including (a) teacher capacity; (b) teacher motivation; and (c) teacher-child interactions—that has major implications for instructional quality. First, many Grade 1 teachers lack the skills and competencies in classroom management and developmentally appropriate teaching/learning methods for building critical foundations in language, literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills. A number of factors contribute to this. Upper primary grades almost always have a higher status than the early grades. Therefore, the newest and least experienced teachers are often assigned to the early grades, usually through a centralized and hierarchical process (Abadzi, 2006). Research in India and Brazil has found that teachers' level of education is a significant predictor of their students' achievement, even in the early grades (Bartlett, 2009). Given the minimal education of many early grade teachers in low-income countries, good supplementary training and professional development is critical. Too often, though, training reflects the same rote practices that take place in the classroom, with little attempt to ensure understanding or provide clearly structured hands-on experience that teachers can then implement with their students.

Second, high absentee rates of primary teachers in majority world countries are a significant problem, along with a lack of engagement when they are in school. Many teachers spend significant amounts of school time outside the classroom and it is not uncommon for teachers to hand over their duties (and a small fraction of their pay) to untrained substitutes while they tend to other obligations (Save the Children, 2007).

Third, the quality of interactions and teaching and learning approaches often falls short. Schools can be stressful places for young children. Physical punishment and humiliation are common even in lower grades and undermine learning and enjoyment. The way teachers interact

with students affects whether children want to stay in school and whether they learn anything (REPOA & the United Republic of Tanzania, 2008). Evidence from Brazil, Nepal, and Uganda demonstrates the benefits of warmer and more encouraging teacher responses, which are of course not independent of the mode of instruction (Bartlett, in press). In Tanzania, children defined a good teacher as someone who is not threatening, teaches until the children understand, and gives extra help and support where needed (REPOA & the United Republic of Tanzania, 2008).

Effective strategies for teaching in crowded early grade classrooms are largely absent. There is a lack of attention to ensuring teachers in the lower primary grades have sufficient knowledge and coherent and accessible teaching strategies to enable young children to gain the necessary basic skills, concepts, and interest in learning. While there have been many efforts over the last 20 years promoting “active learning,” these methods are often only partially understood by teachers and those who supervise and support them. For example, many teachers have heard that lecture methods are old-fashioned and “not good,” but have not been helped to actually organize group work. They may therefore place students’ desks together, in theory to encourage mutual learning and support, but then continue to assign exercises involving no cooperative work. Actual time on task is often hugely inadequate and may be less than 50% (Kaul, Ramachandran & Upadhyay, 1993; Gilles & Quijada, 2008). In the majority world, scheduled contact time for Grade 1 children averages only 700 hours a year (compared to 850 in high-income countries). Furthermore, many factors reduce actual class time, so there may be 200-300 fewer hours of instruction than officially indicated (Bartlett, in press).

**Reading** Remarkably little systematic attention has been given to ensuring that all children are able to become successful readers—including those who join school from homes

with no reading materials and a mother tongue different from the language of instruction in school. Yet this is fundamental to ensuring a students' progress through the formal education process. Research suggests that if children cannot read after about 3 years of education, they probably never will (Abadzi, 2006); they may be promoted regularly and complete school, but will remain functionally illiterate. In short, failure during the first year or two of school to establish basic literacy skills “creates inefficiencies that reverberate all through the system” (Abadzi, 2006, p. 136).

Many of the whole language approaches promoted through numerous projects over the last two decades have failed to deliver for disadvantaged children because they depended on children having a literate context in the home and coming to school with preexisting literacy and numeracy related knowledge. The current drive in certain places for phonics-based approaches has in part been a reaction to this. However, this has severe limitations as it fails to give adequate attention to meaning-making without which there is no reason to read (Tolhurst, 2008; Snow, 2002). Far more explicit and systematic instruction in reading is needed, especially for children struggling with a second language.

**Language of Instruction** In the majority world, significant numbers of children enter primary school speaking a language different from what is used as the medium of instruction. It is estimated that 50% of the world's out-of-school children live in families and communities where the language of instruction in school is rarely used (MacKenzie, 2006). There are policy changes across a number of countries promoting the use of a majority local language during the first years of primary school. However, because most teachers are assigned to schools through a centralized process, they often do not speak the home language of their students, thus hampering learning. Further complicating the situation, there are often multiple languages in a classroom—

students' home languages, the teacher's mother tongue, and the official language(s) of instruction.

The language of instruction is a key factor in supporting or undermining children's successful transition (Abdazi, 2006; Benson, 2005). Children who come to school unfamiliar with the language of instruction are challenged cognitively, but also in terms of their confidence and sense of identity, and are more likely to end up repeating and dropping out of school (Bartlett, in press). Children's attendance levels are higher where instruction at school is in the same language as that spoken at home, and this relationship varies according to other social factors (Smits, Huisman, & Krujiff, 2008). In Malawi, researchers have found that students whose home language is the same as their teacher's (even if the language of instruction is different) perform significantly better in primary school (Chilora, 2000; Chilora & Harris, 2001).

**Availability of Teaching and Learning Materials** The availability of basic learning materials and their appropriate use has demonstrated effects on children's school achievement, most strongly felt in places where material assets are low (Bartlett, in press). Of course, it is schools in the most impoverished communities that suffer the greatest dearth of teaching and learning materials. Considerable effort has been made across many countries to improve and update curriculum and associated textbooks. The distribution of these in a timely manner, however, remains a challenge, particularly in more remote areas. Textbooks are often shared between several children or are written at levels beyond the learners. There are rarely sufficient resources beyond the key textbooks. Where additional materials are provided, too often they are either at an inappropriate level or locked away in cupboards so that they do not get "spoilt." Yet an immersion in print and the opportunity to read for pleasure are recognized as crucial for the development of strong reading abilities. Equally, there is wide recognition of the importance of

concrete materials in aiding children's comprehension of basic mathematical and scientific concepts (Bartlett, in press).

### **Home-School-Community Linkages**

In many parts of the majority world the local school is not seen as part of the fabric of the community, particularly one that parents can influence. This leads to few effective avenues for engagement between home and school. In some cases this is due to the cultural and linguistic discontinuities between home and school in culturally diverse contexts; parents' ability to advocate for their children is clearly hampered when they do not speak the language used in the school.

Other times the gap is related to limited communication with parents and the lack of their involvement in school decision-making. This may not be surprising given that schools' lines of control and reporting are generally upwards through the system to Ministries of Education. Yet parents' engagement with their children's education is one of the most robust predictors of successful transition and learning achievement (UNESCO, 1998).

This section outlined a number of serious problems and gaps in the provision of relevant quality education for young children as they are making a key transition to primary school. These problems influence enrollment and retention. Equally importantly, they influence whether children learn anything and whether they think of themselves as capable learners. This amounts to a crisis in education that occurs right at the beginning and yet school improvement programs and other sector reform efforts across the majority world have traditionally given little attention to the early years of primary education. In addition, those working in ECD rarely forge effective links to primary schools. Likewise, primary schools do not reach out to ECD stakeholders in their surrounding area to ensure good communication and smooth the transition process.

Families, ECD providers, and primary schools all must play an active role in this fragile transition period. What then can provide a useful framework for conceptualizing efforts to address these challenges?

### **AN OVERARCHING FRAMEWORK FOR TRANSITIONS IN THE MAJORITY WORLD: CONTINUITY OR RIGHTS?**

There is much discussion on the importance of continuity within the literature on transition (Lombardi, 1992; Myers, 1997). However, the degree of inequity and depth of poverty within most of the majority world are so extreme that we feel it is important to pose the question of whether continuity is the appropriate organizing framework when many families in the majority world do not receive even the most basic level of support from government systems.

If a child is coming to an ECD center from a home where she is left alone for long periods of time, where the parents are so exhausted from working to put food on the table that they have no time or energy for interacting with her, where there is no access to healthcare, is it continuity that is needed? If an ECD center runs in a tiny dark room and has no materials for children and the teacher receives no support, is it continuity that we want when the child goes to school? The answer to such questions is probably both “yes” and “no.” Continuity is critical in many areas such as: use of mother tongue; familiarity of local teachers; protecting cultural identity; ensuring that all children, families, and teachers feel welcome; and recognizing, respecting, and building on what caregivers and teachers already know and do for their children. Yet transformation, in partnership with those same families and teachers, must be forged and expanded. Continuity as a more general principle becomes a goal as the situations for families, and the services and supports which they access, improve.

## **A Rights Framework**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) establishes a set of legal norms for the protection and wellbeing of all children (United Nations, 1989). Children's rights detail fundamental needs (e.g., for good health, for learning opportunities, for care, for protection from harm), and the obligations of adults to meet these. This includes the obligations of the state to both protect the individual child and help create the conditions in which all children can develop their potential. The younger the child the more dependent they are on adults to ensure their rights. The CRC is legally binding on state parties and has more signatories than any other international convention. As such, it provides a strong basis for initiating public dialogue and action on behalf of young children. It also provides the basis for demanding that governments be more accountable to young children and their families. A rights framework ensures that increased emphasis is placed on influencing government policy as a key to sustained change whether through delivery of services or the protection of children through the legal system. However, while almost all governments have signed the CRC there is often no functional system in place for addressing failures to ensure inclusion. This makes close partnership with civil society all the more critical. Civil society is a critical supporter and catalyst for ECD and in many places continues to be the main provider of ECD services.

The CRC states that ensuring children's rights includes the provision of support programs for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development, enabling children to grow to their fullest potential. Families are the frontline for ensuring their children's rights. A child's upbringing and development are also viewed as primarily the responsibility of the family, with appropriate assistance by governments to parents and legal guardians, including the development of facilities and services for the care of children. (See Preamble and Articles 5, 6,

and18). In essence, quality early childhood and transition programs aim to ensure the conditions under which children's rights are honored and met. Three fundamental features of a children's rights approach to transition are: (a) attention to the whole child and the principle of "best interests of the child"; (b) addressing discrimination and exclusion; (c) working at multiple levels to meet obligations to children.

**Attention to the Whole Child** A holistic view of children's wellbeing, while by no means new, has been validated and encouraged by the CRC. With the impetus of the Convention, this interpretation of the role of ECD is being increasingly taken on board by many agencies as well as, and more importantly, governments including the Philippines, Vietnam, Nepal, Jamaica, Kenya, as well as minority world countries like the UK and France. Holistic planning frameworks, which recognize sector and field realities, are key.

**Addressing Discrimination and Exclusion** A fundamental characteristic of human rights is that they are universal and therefore, by definition, are concerned with addressing exclusion. Transition programs can be a highly effective way to work against deep-rooted patterns of disadvantage and marginalization. Work with parents empowers them not only to better support their children's development but also to demand services and supports from other duty-bearers. Inclusive center-based programs and schools are crucial bridges for many hard-pressed families and unlock opportunities for children.

**Working at Multiple Levels for Children Before and After They Enter School** A rights approach emphasizes the necessity of working at multiple levels if we are to achieve the sort of fundamental value changes and shifts in social mores which we are seeking. ECD and transition initiatives are concerned with influencing the contexts in which children grow up so that (a) they are supportive of children's overall development and (b) issues which impede and

damage that development are addressed. By *contexts* we mean all the different environments that impact young children—families, communities, health centers, ECD centers, schools, community organizations, district bodies, national policy bodies, and donors.

Thus transitions initiatives cover a wide range of activities, from working directly with families to changing systems that marginalize or exclude some children. They include work at the following six levels:

1. Interactions within the family—building family members’ understanding, confidence, and skills to both support their young children’s development and successful transitions as well as hold government and other duty-bearers accountable to make quality services available
2. Community planning—working with communities to make the environment safer for young children, ensure inclusive ECD provision that reaches disadvantaged children, and provide health services for all
3. Provision of center-based ECD services that focus on providing safe, healthy and stimulating environments for young children (e.g., daycare centers, home-based childcare, preschools, workplace childcare)
4. Influencing the early years of primary education to provide consistent sustained support for children’s overall development and learning in a welcoming environment which effectively supports the establishment of basic literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills as well as confidence and social skills
5. Strengthening national resources and building capacity to enable countries to provide good supports for young children’s overall development and their successful transition into and achievement in school

6. Advocacy for legal, policy, and systemic change, or increased social and economic allocations for programs for young children

It may be useful to further consider these six areas of activity under the headings of pedagogy, program, and policy as have been used elsewhere in this book. What are some of the key recommendations emerging?

### **Pedagogy, Program, and Policy: The Rights Framework and the Way Forward**

**Pedagogy** Provision of center-based ECD services and influencing the early years of primary school are centrally concerned with quality pedagogy. In the majority world, access is also a key concern, particularly for ECD programs but also for primary education. At the center of pedagogy is the relationship between learners and teachers, and the learning environment within which they interact. Whether talking about children's first and most influential teachers (their families), early childhood program staff, or primary school teachers, it is the quality of adults' interactions with children which is at the heart of this chapter's concern. As majority world governments take more interest in ECD it is vital to:

- Avoid a downward extension of Grade 1 and over formalized approaches in ECD programs. Instead, the focus should be on improving primary schools' readiness for children to support children's learning by encouraging the "pushing up" of good practices characteristic of ECD programs into the lower primary grades. This includes a number of factors such as the provision of a welcoming environment, particularly for families without prior access to ECD service (the vast majority in many places) who may be interacting with an educational institution for the first time. Also important is an emphasis on laying firm foundations in language, enthusiasm for learning, and social development.

- Focus in early primary grades on improving the teaching of reading and math in enjoyable, systematic, and structured ways that ensure success for children who often may not come from literate contexts. This should involve: (a) intensive and interactive practice to improve language knowledge; (b) mother tongue teaching of reading and basic concepts; and (c) availability of books that can be taken home.
- Provide specific in-service training and mentoring for both ECD and lower primary teachers (some of which can be conducted jointly). Build understanding, skills, and competencies regarding how young children learn and practical ways of supporting diverse learners (e.g., different ages, some with ECD program experience and most without).
- Ensure the availability and use of core teaching and learning materials for both ECD and early primary classes. Many of these can be made with locally available materials and should draw upon local knowledge, culture, and traditions through involvement of parents or community members in classes. In addition, families can be encouraged to make use of local stories, songs, and games and to make materials to use at home.

**Program and Policy** These two areas are so intertwined that, in order to avoid repetition, they will be discussed under one heading. While the emphasis on influencing government, central to a rights-based approach, is crucial, it is important to remember that the government's role is not always to provide for all rights, but to ensure that rights are realized. Moral obligations to children long precede any treaty and extend throughout society. Civil society has been a primary driver and catalyst for ECD and has long played a central role in ECD services.

ECD programs It is critical for governments to find ways to work with a broad range of civil society organizations and with communities in ways that reach out and genuinely engage families. Programs must strengthen community level supports and work through local civil society as well as government. Analysis of what civil society organizations are doing, often through interventions which seek to build bridges between government initiatives and local community, is useful for building strong ECD programs (AKF, 2007).

ECD policies In many countries, ECD policies are being developed for the first time. Some of these follow a holistic framework and are multi-sectoral in nature; others are more sector-specific and often sit within education. Whatever the framework, a broad and inclusive network of ECD services linking effectively with primary schools is needed. The delivery of quality learning opportunities in ways that engage with the diversity of learners and communities at hand is a key policy and program issue.

Across many developing countries, policies are emerging that add one or more years of preschool to basic education. This expansion of access is for the most part a very positive step. However, there are two important points here:

- Ensure pre-primary classes do not become a downward extension of uninspiring primary classes in a misguided attempt to give children an academic edge (see pedagogy section above). Rather, ensure that policy promotes uptake by early primary of good ECD practices.
- Make concerted efforts to build on and create links with existing early childhood services in the community. Ensure that there are inclusive policies which link all types of ECD providers and local primary schools. This would include flexibility and responsiveness to local situations in phasing in new policies (such as those stipulating qualification

requirements as discussed earlier). Interface and cooperation between state and non-state providers is key in addressing both access and quality issues.

**Early Primary** The percentage of children enrolled in ECD programs is, as noted above, small in most developing countries. And of this number, the majority does *not* come from the disadvantaged groups that most need services. Therefore, it all the more urgent to ensure that there is adequate policy and program attention to the quality of the first years of primary school. The important policy point here is:

- Re-conceptualize the way the massive school improvement efforts across the majority world are designed so that attention and resources for the early grades are prioritized. This would include finding ways to influence and change the status of lower primary, as well as recruiting and assigning teachers so that experienced and capable teachers are placed in lower grades.

**Evidence-Based Programs and Policy** Analysis of core enrollment, retention, and achievement data and examination of the effects of different interventions/programs is fundamental to planning effective programs for young children (Arnold et al., 2006).

- Ensure regular and clear analysis of key data as an essential step in changing policies, programs, and practice.
- Develop an Early Transition Report that can provide information at local or national levels to look at the following: poverty levels (the percentage of children under 8 in poverty), stunting, participation in ECD programs, teacher-child ratio at Grade 1 (as compared to average in primary), drop-out and repetition rates at Grades 1 and 2 compared to those at the end of primary, teacher absenteeism, mother tongue policies and actual use in ECD settings and early primary, student-textbook ratios in Grade 1 versus

overall for primary, specialized training for lower primary teachers (pre- but especially in-service), and time on task and assessment of reading in Grade 2 or 3.

In Minority world countries there has been a rich and diverse range of research related activities to inform policy and programs. A number have been longitudinal and have provided impetus for changing program funding—including those focused on transition issues. This chapter has highlighted some of the growing evidence of the benefits of attention to the early years emerging from majority world countries. Evidence of benefits has been critical in influencing government policies in a number of countries. Efforts such as the Young Lives research study mentioned in this chapter are illustrating the importance of more longitudinal research in the majority world to inform programs and policies. In addition, the work on early transitions by promoting ready children, families, and schools being undertaken by international and national agencies is leading to a growing set of reports and research from program experiences across majority world countries. Yet, more longitudinal research looking at the impact of programs is critical if more children are to enter school, stay there, and learn effectively.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

In the majority world, attention to transition is central to addressing the acute crisis of high drop-out and repetition during the early primary years and the establishment of persistent patterns of failure. Transition frameworks deliberately link ECD and early primary components, and work to expand ECD initiatives and also increase attention to the first years of primary schooling. Further, they build on and strengthen parents' own interactions with and support to their children.

This chapter recommends action on the following five fronts: (a) more and better ECD, ensuring that the most disadvantaged children are reached; (b) improved links, coordination, cooperation, and understanding between ECD programmes and primary school systems; (c) prioritization of attention to and resources for the early grades of primary school as a central component of education reform; (d) partnership between parents, civil society, and government; and (e) better information and data. The rights-based framework we propose requires emphasis on a number of cross-cutting themes which apply to all of the above. First, deliberate efforts are required to reach and include marginalized children and families. Second, work is needed at multiple levels in order to influence practice and governance. Third, a holistic approach in which the best interests of the child are kept front and center is essential.

Early childhood interventions ensure that children are ready for school and ready to make the most of many opportunities in life. But equally importantly, schools must be ready for all children—whether or not they have had the opportunity to participate in an early childhood program. This would dramatically improve the chances of meeting Education for All and Millennium Development Goals and make an important contribution to addressing entrenched cycles of poverty and exclusion. Work with the neglected early primary grades concurrently with supports for children’s overall development before they enter school is a powerful combination for success and for successful transitions.

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Table 1. Disparities in pre-school enrollment (3- and 4- year olds) selected countries

<b>Country</b>	<b>Richest 20%</b>	<b>Poorest 20%</b>
Kyrgyzstan	47%	7%
Vietnam	80%	35%
Mongolia	73%	9%
Syria	18%	3%
Cote d'Ivoire	24%	1%

<sup>1</sup> The term transition in this chapter refers to the period of time before and after a child moves from either home or an early childhood program into primary school, and the passage from one to the other.

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank has loaned \$1.7 billion to 91 projects in 52 countries by 2007. This includes stand-alone projects and others with sub-components for ECS.