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The Education of 4- to 8-Year Olds - Re-designing School Entrance Phase



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Foreword

Transitions are always challenging. Leaving behind the familiar and moving into the unknown is part of the rhythm of human development. Nowhere is this more evident than in education and schooling. Learners leave behind the familiar, but they also build on what they know and have learned as they negotiate the unknown territory of new knowledge and of skills as yet un-mastered.

The transition from the primary to the post-primary phases of schooling has been the focus of much deliberation and research. Similar scrutiny has also been applied to the move from second-level to third-level education, from schooling to further and higher education and to the world of work. To date, less attention has been paid to the experiences of younger children moving from the relative informality of the wide range of early childhood education settings into the pre-school or school environment. However, the current social, economic and political focus on education of very young children, and on early childhood as a life-stage in itself, is placing more attention on this first educational transition.

This publication is focused on 4–8 year olds. As is evidenced by the papers presented in this yearbook the experiences of these children vary widely across Europe. Some European 4 year olds are in classrooms, behind desks, with books, and homework, and all the trappings associated with formal schooling. Others are on swings and in sand-pits, painting and making, learning through play. For other children, it's a mixture of the play world and the school world. Children who are poor, who are immigrant or the children of immigrants, who have special needs or language difficulties may find themselves excluded from both worlds, and from many of the combinations in-between. For such children the transition challenge is to move from exclusion to inclusion.

We learn much from these papers about good practice, good ideas, good research and good policies. We also learn that the emerging critical issue is how to ensure that such positive experiences are available for *all* children, across Europe. We have increasing evidence that this is not simply an educational imperative; it is also both democratic and moral.

As President of CIDREE, I wish to thank the Swiss Coordination Centre for Research in Education for taking the lead in this important theme. It is fitting that such a central issue be deliberated at the heart of Europe, with a proud tradition of innovation and research on early childhood education.

Anne Looney

President of CIDREE

CEO National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA), Ireland

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Introduction

— *Silvia Grossenbacher* and *Urs Vögeli-Mantovani*

«Getting off to a good start matters most»¹ – when applied to education, this slogan is valid both for every individual child and for the education available in a given society and the form it takes. The experiences that «newcomers» have during the phase of their initiation to school have an impact that goes way beyond their short-term cognitive, emotional and social development. These experiences also influence their longer-term enjoyment of learning and their school success as preconditions for lifelong learning. So it need not come as a surprise that educational policy is focusing more and more attention on the preschool stage and the school-entrance phase. Both the European Commission (1995) and the OECD (2001; 2006) have carried out comparative studies concerning the preschool stage and both stress its importance. The studies show that children in the majority of countries in Europe have the possibility of attending a preschool establishment for at least two years before the start of primary school (OECD, 2006, 77). However, any attempt to go further than this general statement immediately reveals the very considerable differences in the detailed arrangements for preschool, attendance at which is voluntary in most places, and also in the nature of the transition to compulsory school. Elucidating these differences is one of the goals set for this Yearbook.

Opportunities and risks

Starting school or the transition from voluntary preschool to compulsory primary school is a crucial step, which is tied up with both opportunities and risks. Starting school generally takes place at a particular, administratively determined age with no consideration of the different development patterns that children go through, including differences in their timing. The general rule is that the transition is a stimulating step and children look forward to it. For some children, however, it can also be a difficult step, bringing with it their first experience of failure or discouragement. The transition is more difficult in those places where there are very marked differences between the routines and the expectations of everyday life in preschool and primary school. It might, for instance, be that the learning processes in school are much more rigidly structured, and it is expected of all children that, at one and the same time, they are able to sit still and listen, follow the teacher's instructions, tackle the jobs set for them and solve these autonomously, work cooperatively with other children, and so on. If even children who had attended kindergarten experience this form of school routine as restrictive and «hard work» (see contribution by *Sharp* and *O'Connell* in this Yearbook), then such an impression is bound to be all

¹ The original German version of this slogan is «Auf den Anfang kommt es an». It was coined in 2007 by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

the more intense for children entering school directly without preschool experience. It was to avoid this situation that the generalised preschool opportunities referred to above were created, and some countries have already declared attendance at preschool to be compulsory, while others are planning to do so. Yet others have opted for the route of integrating preschool in primary school (see *inter alia* contribution by McKenney, Letschert and Kloprogge in this Yearbook).

Change in perspective: children's readiness for school and schools' readiness for children

For a long time, the transition was looked at purely unilaterally, from the perspective of the child, resulting inevitably in the well-known debates about school maturity or school readiness (see contribution by De Vos in this Yearbook). Although the concepts themselves are controversial and there is no generally applicable definition of «school readiness», use of the term has often been linked to selection decisions (BMBF, 2007, 236). There is, however, another possible perspective that is gaining more and more ground. The transition is seen as a process which must be shaped and mastered by all those involved. From this, it becomes clear that, as of that moment in time when compulsory schooling starts for the children, the school must also be ready and able to take on the children with the different conditions that each one has evolved under by then. A balance between discontinuity and continuity must therefore be struck in the transition, to make it easier for children and parents to cope with the development task that is linked to the change in status and role.

Various routes of continuity through the transition

What this means from the institutional point of view is narrowing the gap between preschool and school, and there are certainly various different ways of achieving that. On the basis of its international comparison, the OECD distinguishes between two main approaches:

- the (pre-)school approach, according to which primary-school contents and methods are transposed to the preschool stage, and
- the socio-pedagogical approach, according to which a broad pedagogical concept, combining care, upbringing and learning, also remains in play during the initial years of primary school (OECD 2006, 59).

One of the first steps towards narrowing the gap is often to place the preschool and school phases within the responsibility of the same political and/or administrative unit (such as the ministry of education) or to reinforce cooperation between the competent units at this level.

Geographically, the narrowing of the gap is often reflected in having the preschool establishment in the same building as the compulsory school. That makes for easier contacts

between the teachers, some of whom may well provide tuition to both stages. This brings us on to a further means for narrowing the gap, namely joint training for the teachers.

Training teachers in such a way that they are able to give tuition at both preschool and primary-school levels makes it easier for them to discuss targets, concepts and methods and reinforces pedagogical continuity.

Guaranteeing this continuity is also beneficial for drawing up curricula covering both the preschool years and the (early) years of primary school. Most countries have already developed such curricula, although the «range of years» they cover varies (see, for example, the contributions by *Carmichael* or *FitzPatrick* and *Forster* in this Yearbook).

In those places in which such institutional movements and the narrowing of the gap have not yet advanced so far (i.e. where preschool and school are still largely separate institutions) there are, nonetheless, signs of various efforts intended to simplify coping with this transition for the children concerned. Such efforts include careful preparation of the children in the form of visits to the school and talks with their future teacher. Other possible means include informing the primary school of the children's learning and development stage (for instance through copies of preschool reports), joint kindergarten and school project days or the appointment of children already at primary school to act as «facilitators» in introducing the «newcomers» to the customs of the school and the layout of its infrastructure. Another suitable means for strengthening the contacts and substantive exchanges is to provide joint in-service training for teachers from both the preschool and the primary stage (see, for example, the contributions by *Grossi* and *Poliandri* or *Ferrero* and *Uceda* in this Yearbook).

Continuity from the children's point of view, however, means maintaining relationships, i.e. the possibility of moving on to the next stage in the company of their friends, the provision of a bridging phase with the kindergarten teacher in their familiar surroundings and the continuous support of the parents (OECD, 2006, 69). One further means for organising the transition is to set up a separate school-entrance phase. If such a school-entrance phase includes children of different ages and if tuition is provided by a mixed team of teachers (covering preschool, school and special-needs pedagogy) and if each child is able to make their way through the phase at their own pace, then it will satisfy many of the requirements of a transition without pitfalls (see the contributions by *Vögeli-Mantovani* and *Wiederkehr Steiger* or *Stanzel-Tischler* in this Yearbook).

Redesigning the school-entrance phase

Many countries are currently going through a process of redesigning their preschool and school-entrance phase. One of the hopes linked to that is for greater equality of opportunities. It has been shown that it is especially children from socially disadvantaged families, which often include children with migration backgrounds, who experience difficul-

ties at the transition between preschool and school (see, for example, the contributions by *De Vos* or *Köpataki* and *Szabó* in this Yearbook). A second reason for the redesign is to be sought in the fact that early experiences of failure ought to be avoided in order not to jeopardise the enjoyment of learning and motivation that are so important for lifelong learning. A third line of argument is based on the findings of neuro-psychology and calls for greater use to be made of children's learning capacity, even beginning in early childhood. This is often also combined with the demand for early school entrance or the earlier commencement of systematic learning processes arranged according to targets; by no means the least aspiration underlying this is the hope of enhancing the school success of all children. Another of the aims of the Yearbook is to elucidate the specific design of kindergarten and the transition in various countries and to look into redesign projects.

In redesigning the school-entrance phase, very many different questions crop up, affecting areas such as educational planning, curriculum and school development and educational research. It is therefore very easy to understand why CIDREE should take an interest in this subject. Ten institutions have responded positively to the request for contributions. The editors and publishers of the Yearbook would like to express their sincere thanks to all the authors for their participation in creating this volume and for the excellent spirit of cooperation. The following sections contain brief introductions to each of the articles. They are arranged in an approximate geographical order from north to south: England, Scotland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium (Flemish Region), Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, Italy and Spain.

England

Caroline Sharp and *Sharon O'Donnell* show that England has a tradition of a comparatively young school starting age. Although there are many different patterns of pre-school attendance, children typically start attending a pre-school setting at age three and then move to a school «reception» class at age four. The next year they move to year 1 in the same school. The curriculum for three to five-year-olds is known as the *Foundation Stage*. It aims to help children make progress in their development and learning. The Foundation Stage and the Key Stage 1 curriculum contain some common elements. The main differences between the two curricula are that the *National Curriculum for Key Stage 1* is divided into ten subject areas with prescribed programmes of study for each, whereas the Foundation Stage curriculum is more integrated and flexible. In England, children usually make the transition to a school reception class at age four. The transition to a more formal curriculum takes place a year later, when children begin year 1. Thus, the English education system has divorced the transition to school from the transition to formal education. Although school reception classes have been clearly designated part of pre-school provision (located in schools), research evidence suggests, that reception classes continue to pose challenges in relation to their ability to offer key features of early childhood provision, especially child-initiated activities, play-based activities and sustained interaction with peers and adults.

Scotland

Children in Scotland begin their formal education at primary school and they usually start school when they are aged between 4-and-a-half and 5-and-a-half. In January 2006, 99 per cent of 4-year-olds and 96 per cent of 3-year-olds were registered for pre-school education. *Eileen Carmichael* shows that over the recent years a range of approaches has been adopted in pre-school establishments and primary schools to secure smooth and positive transitions for children, including open days, staff exchange visits, regular staff communication and written progress records from nursery to primary. Also the curriculum reform process currently taking place in Scotland is addressing transition issues as it involves the development of a coherent curriculum for children from 3 to 18 years. The implementation of *Curriculum for Excellence* will begin in the 2008-09 school year and from 2009-10 all pre-school centres and schools across Scotland will be working on the delivery of the new curriculum. *Curriculum for Excellence* will bring together the former 3-5 and 5-14 curriculum guidelines and extend the approaches which are used in pre-school into the early years of primary school.

Ireland

In Ireland, primary schools provide 8 years of state-education for children from 4-12 years old, beginning with two years of infant education. All 5-year-olds and about half of 4-year-olds attend infant classes located in primary schools, although compulsory education does not begin until age 6. There is range of childcare provision for children prior to entry into the school system. *Sarah B. FitzPatrick* and *Arlene Forster* explain in their article that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is currently developing a national framework for practitioners to support children's learning and development from birth to six years. *The Framework for Early Learning* is for all parents and families, childminders and practitioners working across the range of early years' settings in Ireland. The *Primary School Curriculum* was published in 1999 for all state primary schools. The challenge of supporting practitioners in developing an effective early years' pedagogy for the benefit of all children is central to both the Framework and the *Primary School Curriculum*. Ensuring upward continuity and progression between the Framework and the Primary School Curriculum is key to the NCCA's current work. Practitioners working with four to eight year olds have endorsed the critical role played by the adult in extending and enriching children's early learning and development. Yet pedagogical practice has ranged from the academic, adult-directed approach to a *laissez-faire* activity approach. In finding a way to balance these two approaches across early years' settings, the NCCA is using a *show and tell* strategy. This strategy aims to negotiate a pedagogy that captures the dynamic and interactive processes of learning and development for all children in all settings for early learning. The *Framework for Early Learning* (to be launched in spring 2008) will describe a range of interaction strategies which the adult can use to extend children's learning and development. In addition, through Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the Framework will showcase these interaction strategies in use in a variety of early childhood settings and with children of different ages and stages. Together, these

two strategies (telling and showing) should support a greater understanding of, and commitment to, appropriate early years' pedagogy among practitioners.

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, since 1985, the separate systems of nursery education and primary school have been integrated into a new and undivided system of eight years of primary education. Formal compulsory education starts in the Netherlands at the age of five, and there is, at the moment, a debate to bring forward this date to the age of four, since nearly all children attend primary school from the age of four. Dutch primary education is obligatory for all children. In a Dutch perspective of the school entrance phase, *Susan McKenney, Jos Letschert and Jo Kloprogge* look at the arguments for integrating kindergarten and primary education, the initial sensibility between the cultures and traditions of teachers in kindergarten and primary education, their competences, the aims, the pedagogical principles and beliefs and the gradual process of habituation. They describe some current issues like reconciling the bringing forward of subject related aims with development-oriented education and learning through play. The authors also look at the origination and risks of a new gap in the process of development in the early years: the gap between pre-school education and primary education. Some children attend pre-school programmes from the age of two or three, programmes which continue frequently in primary education, other children don't. The early phase of the integrated primary school pre-supposes specific competences on the part of teachers. On this point, the authors make some suggestions for redesigning teacher education for the whole period of what is called basic education, a period of schooling for children from approximately two or three to the age of fourteen/fifteen.

Belgium (Flanders)

Elementary education in Flanders, consisting of a pre-primary and a primary level, starts at two and a half years of age. Compulsory education starts on September 1st of the year a child becomes six. *Gunter De Vos* explains in his article that the idea for an elementary school, more specifically education for children from two-and-a-half to twelve years old, arose in the seventies. Transforming separate pre-primary and primary schools into elementary schools, enabling pupils to experience a continuous learning process, was highly promoted later on. Care and education for young children and children from six to twelve should no longer be two separate worlds in Flanders. Collective tests on groups of children, assessing their «school readiness», have been abandoned. Since 1994 a special needs monitoring system helps teachers monitor the development of young children from the beginning of their school career. This monitoring system has influenced the concept of developmental objectives as issued by the government in 1998. These objectives describe the effect a pre-primary school should have on as many children as possible. Presenting research results, the author of the article shows that underprivileged and allochtonous children already suffer from serious learning disadvantage when they first enter pre-primary school. In this respect, he points out that various methods of prevention can play an important role.

Hungary

Mária Köpataki and *Mária Szabó* briefly describe the system of education in Hungary. There is day care provision for children under 3 years of age and then pre-school for children aged 3 to 6, where compulsory education starts at the age of 5. Primary education starts in general schools at the age of 6. There is a possibility for a later start, when a child is not «developed» enough to start school. In this case a diagnosis of an expert is compulsory to certify this immaturity. But the expert's opinion is only a suggestion, and it is the parents' right to decide at what age their child starts general school. The implementation of this regulation can create difficult situations both in kindergartens and schools. A number of advantages and disadvantages of this situation are described in the article. A second issue of the article is the Hungarian educational administration, which is a highly decentralized, three-level system: national, regional (county) and local, where the local level takes in the schools and those running them, mainly local authorities. In this system, schools have a high level of autonomy, and the responsibility is shared between several actors. The authors also discuss educational priorities for age 4 to 8. This part of the report is based on the national level strategic documents for education, which declare the importance of the entrance phase of education. The aims defined in these middle and long-term documents are presented, along with the tools, planned activities and programmes which provide support in achieving the goals.

Austria

In Austria, compulsory education starts during the first September after a child's sixth birthday. Attendance at education or care institutions prior to compulsory education is voluntary. Since the 1999/2000 school year, regulations have been adopted in the field of primary school entry which aim to achieve the optimum development of all children and protect them from failure experiences. Children who are of school age, though not ready for school, receive pre-school education in primary school: either in separate pre-school classes or in so-called «*Schuleingang*» classes (classes which comprise the level of pre-school, the first and the second grade). *Elisabeth Stanzel-Tischler* shows in her article that these regulations have resulted in a better support quota for preschoolers and have made learning times more flexible. The federal government, in office since January 2007, has included in its government programme the aim for kindergartens to be increasingly considered as institutions of education in future, geared towards preparing children for primary school. In Austria, parents can decide whether they send their children to kindergarten. All the regulations concerning kindergarten are subject to the discretion of the provincial governments and therefore vary from province to province. Taking the current legal situation and practice, the author discusses possibilities for development at the interface of kindergarten and primary school and presents suggestions for measures to improve the transition between them.

Switzerland

In Switzerland, pre-school (Kindergarten) and primary school are two different institutions, although both belong to the education sector. Transition from pre-school to primary school is abrupt and may lead to the first experience of failure for many children (such as being forced to repeat a year or being selected to attend special classes). Pre-school duration varies between one and three years. A kindergarten curriculum has only existed since 1999. Up to the present, pre-school attendance in most Swiss cantons has been a matter of parental choice. Compulsory schooling starts with primary school-entrance when children are six years old. These have been the main aspects of the school-entrance phase up to now, but they will be changed soon by an experimental and a developmental project, as *Urs Vögeli-Mantovani* und *Brigitte Wiederkehr* report in their contribution. In June 2007, the 26 Cantonal Ministers of Education decided that pre-school (2 years) will become compulsory, which means that compulsory pre-schooling-plus-schooling would then have to start when children were four years old in order to give all children the opportunity of being well-prepared for school. To make the transition from pre-school to primary school smoother and more flexible, all the German-speaking cantons have been involved since 2002 in a large experimental school project, eleven of them with pilot classes. The project is experimenting with new forms of school entrance, linking the two years of pre-school with either the first year of primary school (Grundstufe) or the first two years of primary school (Basisstufe). In the pilot classes, children learn in mixed age groups, are taught by two teachers (team teaching) and the pedagogical concept is focused on development and learning. Children can pass through this first phase of education at their individual pace, and children with (learning) disabilities are included in it. In 2010, substantiated results will be available from the longitudinal evaluation, along with recommendations, providing a sound basis for taking educational-policy decisions.

Italy

After nursery school (up to 3 years of age) children in Italy may attend the first level of the national school system, i.e. pre-primary school, on a voluntary basis. Pre-primary school attendance runs at more than 97 percent. Compulsory schooling starts when children are 6 years old. Primary school lasts 5 years, and the first year functions as a link to pre-primary school. As *Lina Grossi* and *Donatella Poliandri* state in their article, a rigid centralized administration organisation characterized the Italian national school system. A law issued in 1999, while still maintaining national standards, conferred the right on each school administration to take autonomous decisions in areas concerning the school curriculum and timetables and the organisation of classes and learning groups. In the first cycle of education (primary school) the Reform introduced the «National Framework for a Personalised Curriculum» and even though still being worked out in detail, it establishes the basic attainment levels, providing quality standards that all schools must guarantee. The law on school autonomy has permitted each school to draw up its own «Educational Programme», which defines the projects and activities adopted and includes a complete curriculum in compliance with the rules and regulations established by law.

Curriculum projecting is based on two fundamental criteria: uniform learning standards and personalised learning courses. The principle of continuity throughout compulsory education forms the basis of the entire education system. This is ensured horizontally by the cooperation and interaction between various territorial institutions and vertically through the cooperation and interaction of different school levels. Vertical continuity is a widespread practice between pre-primary and primary schools. They prefer launching projects involving activities for incoming students and shared didactic activities between the different school levels. Another element of continuity is the Portfolio, a document which testifies to the student's learning process.

Spain

As Carmen Ferrero and Consuelo Uceda describe in their contribution, the «Spanish Education Act» which has recently been passed, defines pre-primary education as the first stage in the education system, dealing with children aged 0 to 6. Pre-primary education is divided into two cycles; the first from 0 to 3 years, the second from ages 3 to 6. Pre-primary provision, although not compulsory, is attended by 95 percent of children of this age. Primary education is defined as the stage of compulsory schooling comprising six academic years, which are normally completed between the ages of 6 and 12. The «Royal Decrees» further expanding the «Spanish Education Act» stipulate the core curriculum nationwide for the second pre-primary cycle and primary education. Based on this core curriculum, the autonomous communities develop their own particular elements of the curriculum and, finally, it is the teaching team who draw up the «Curriculum Plan». The learning objectives are defined in terms of skills which must be developed in the course of the pre-primary and primary stages. The article analyses the requisite conditions for the transition from one stage to the other within current pre-primary and primary education in the Spanish education system. It highlights the process in which children's rights, needs and interests are to become the main focus of attention. In the same way, certain pedagogical criteria and good practices are also provided and studied. They refer to specific aspects in education at these stages. As far as methodology is concerned, the teaching/learning process and the attention to diversity are examined. The authors also take into account organisational aspects, such as timetables and spaces; family involvement and admission plans. Finally, didactic, material and human resources are examined in detail in order to provide an overall approach to the topic.

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Starting School at Four: the English Experience

— *Caroline Sharp and Sharon O'Donnell*

Abstract

England has a tradition of a comparatively young school starting age, with children beginning compulsory education the school term after their fifth birthday. Although there are many different patterns of pre-school attendance, children typically start attending a pre-school setting at age three and then move to a school «reception» class at age four. The next year they move to Year 1 in the same school. The Foundation Stage was established in England in 2000, creating a distinct phase of education for children aged three to five, which spans the transition to school.

This article focuses on the period between pre-school and year 2 (children aged three to seven). It explains how and why England's early starting age came about, describes the aims, curriculum and pedagogy in the early years and considers the evidence of the impact of this system on children, including their views of transition to a more formal curriculum at age five.

Introduction

In England, the statutory school starting age (the term after a child's fifth birthday) is low in relation to that of many other countries. This article explains some of the main reasons for England's early starting age and explores some of the consequences for young children.

Table 1 includes information on school starting ages in all 34 countries participating in Eurydice, the information network on education in Europe.¹

Table 1 Compulsory age of starting school in European countries, 2007

Four	Northern Ireland
Five	England, Malta, Netherlands, Scotland, Wales
Six	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus ² , Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece ³ , Hungary ⁴ , Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg ⁵ ,

¹The Eurydice Network includes the Member States of the European Union (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom); the three countries of the European Free Trade Association which are members of the European Economic Area (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway); and Turkey (an EU candidate country involved in the lifelong learning programme).

Table 1 contains information about the compulsory school starting age in 34 European countries, but this often represents the latest age at which children must start school. In several European countries, most children enter school below compulsory school age (for example, schooling in the Netherlands is compulsory from age five, but virtually all children start school at four).

There is also a trend towards requiring children to start education at a younger age, with several countries having lowered their school starting ages recently and others making pre-school attendance compulsory.

Children in UK countries start school at a comparatively young age, with Northern Ireland having the lowest statutory age of entry to school. The compulsory school starting age in Northern Ireland was changed from five to four years in 1989 because it was thought that all children would benefit from spending a total of 12 full years at school (seven years at primary school and five at secondary school)¹⁰.

In Scotland, compulsory education starts at age five, although many children start at four because schools have a single intake at the beginning of the school year. Local authorities set a cut-off date (normally 1st March) defining the cohort of children eligible to start school at the beginning of the following school year (normally in August). This means that Scottish children do not usually start school below the age of four years and six months.

England and Wales have a similar system, with a compulsory school starting age of five, although the majority of children start school at four. Because the cut-off date is the same as the beginning of the school year, children born in August can start school in September, just after their fourth birthday.

² Cyprus: Compulsory school age is actually determined as children who are five years eight months old before 1st September – the start of the academic year. Pre-primary education is compulsory for five- to six-year olds, that is, for one year, for children who are four years and eight months old by 1st September.

³ Greece: the Government is considering making pre-primary education compulsory.

⁴ Hungary: but kindergarten attendance is compulsory at age five.

⁵ Luxembourg: but pre-primary attendance is compulsory from age four.

⁶ Romania: reduced to six from seven from the 2003–04 school year (at the same time, the period of compulsory education in Romania was extended from eight to ten years).

⁷ Denmark: the Minister of Education has suggested that pre-primary classes for six- to seven-year-olds are renamed «first form» and made mandatory. This is with a view to easing transition from kindergarten to compulsory education.

⁸ Latvia: but pre-primary education is compulsory for five- to six-year-olds.

⁹ Poland: but kindergarten is compulsory at age six.

¹⁰ This information was supplied by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland.

Reasons for the relatively low compulsory school starting age in England

The school term after a child's fifth birthday was established as the official school starting age for English children in the 1870 Education Act. This decision was not taken on the basis of any developmental or educational criteria (see Woodhead, 1989). Some members of parliament argued for six as the school starting age. The main arguments in favour of setting the school starting age as early as five were related to child protection (from exploitation at home and unhealthy conditions in the streets). There was also a political imperative to appease employers because setting an early starting age enabled a relatively early school leaving age to be established: children could enter the workforce at age 12 having completed their primary education.

There was no legislation prohibiting children under five from attending schools, and the years following the legislation saw large numbers of under-fives admitted to primary schools. Concerns about the welfare of children under five in schools (ranging from babies to four-year-olds) led to an official enquiry in 1908 (see Bilton, 1993; Woodhead, 1989). This concluded that young children received little benefit from elementary education and should no longer be accommodated in schools.

By the time of the influential Plowden Report (DES, 1967) on primary schooling, the predominant pattern of entry to primary school was termly admission at statutory age (i.e. there were three intakes each year, enabling children to start school at the beginning of the term after they attained the age of five).

An effective lowering of the school entry age in England has taken place since 1967. The trend was identified by researchers in 1983, when the NFER surveyed all English and Welsh local authorities (Cleave *et al.*, 1985). A majority of local authorities reported that their schools admitted children to school before statutory school age. Many schools favoured a single admission at the beginning of the year in which a child became five (annual entry to school). Schools formed separate «reception» classes for children aged between four and five years.

In 1986, a parliamentary select committee recommended keeping the statutory school starting age while expanding the practice of allowing four-year-olds to start school:

There should be no change in the statutory age of entry into school. However, we consider that local education authorities should, if they do not already do so, and under suitable conditions, move towards allowing entry into the maintained education system at the beginning of the school year in which the child becomes five.
(GB. Parliament. HoC. ESAC, 1986, para. 5.44)

The «suitable conditions» referred to by the committee were that reception classes should provide a similar environment, staffing and curriculum to nursery classes.

The following year, another NFER survey of local authorities confirmed the trend for lowering the age of entry to school, with ten local authorities reporting recent changes in favour of earlier entry (Sharp, 1987). However, few were ensuring that four-year-olds in reception classes were experiencing any of the «suitable conditions» mentioned by the select committee. Concerns about four-year-olds in reception classes were reflected in a Select Committee enquiry report of 1989, which proposed that: «No further steps should be taken towards introducing four-year-olds into inappropriate primary school settings» (GB. Parliament. HoC. ESAC, 1988, para. 7:13).

Nevertheless, the trend was further accelerated during the 1990's following the introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act (GB. Statutes, 1988). By 2002, 99 per cent of four-year-olds were attending some kind of educational provision, with 59 per cent of four-year-olds in infant classes¹¹ (DfES, 2002).

There are a number of reasons for the trend towards lowering the age of entry to primary schools in England which began in the 1980s (see Sharp, 1987 and Daniels *et al.*, 1995). Pre-school places were insufficient to meet parental demand for full-time provision, which was rising due to an increasing female participation in the workforce. The 1988 Education Reform Act allowed schools greater control over their own budgets, which were largely based on the number of children on roll. This coincided with a fall in the birth rate and a consequent reduction in the population of children starting school, giving schools both the incentive and the capacity (empty classrooms) to take younger children. There was little inducement to create nursery classes because nursery education was governed by official recommendations stipulating the adult-child ratio (of 1:13, compared with 1:30 or more in primary classes) and specific staff qualifications required, making it a more complicated and expensive option. But these regulations did not apply to school reception classes, even though they catered for four-year-olds. Pressure built up on local authorities to allow primary schools to accept four-year-olds. One of the immediate consequences of the increasing trend towards early entry to school was a removal of four-year-olds from pre-school settings, leading to concerns for the viability of nurseries and playgroups.

¹¹ Given that these statistics are collected in January, they represent an under-estimate of the number of children who were four years old when they started school, as many would have started in the previous September.

The structure and curriculum for English three- to six-year-olds

Figure 1 shows the stages of education and the different types of provision available to children aged three to six in England.

Figure 1. Stages in the English education system

Stage of Education	Provision	Age of child on entry
Foundation Stage	Pre-school (e.g. children's centre, nursery class, nursery school, play group)	3 years
	School reception class	4 years
Key Stage 1	Year 1	5 years
	Year 2	6 years

In England, most three-year-old children attend pre-school settings. These may be run by private, voluntary or public providers and are staffed by people with a range of early years qualifications.

“In April 2004, all children aged three and four became entitled to 12.5 hours of free pre-school education for 33 weeks of the year. This entitlement was increased to 38 weeks in April 2006 and the intention is to increase this further in future so that parents of all three- and four-year-olds will be able to access 20 hours of state-funded pre-school education for 38 weeks of the year.”

The Education Act of 2002 (England and Wales. Statutes, 2002) extended the National Curriculum to the pre-school phase of education and made statutory requirements for providers receiving government funding.

The curriculum for three- to five-year-olds is known as the Foundation Stage. It aims to help three- to five-year-old children to make progress in their development and learning. The philosophy underpinning the Foundation Stage curriculum is that learning should be carefully planned, structured and delivered with an emphasis on activities that are fun, relevant and motivating for each child.

Six areas of learning form an integral part of the Foundation Stage:

- Personal, social and emotional development, comprising «dispositions and attitudes», ‘social development» and «emotional development».
- Communication, language and literacy, comprising «language for communication and thinking», «linking sounds and letters», «reading» and «writing».
- Mathematical development, comprising «numbers as labels and for counting», «calculating» and «shape, space and measures».
- Knowledge and understanding of the world.
- Physical development.
- Creative development (QCA and DfEE, 2000).

The time to be spent on each area of learning is not prescribed. The headteacher and staff decide on the timetable, as well as on matters such as classroom organisation.

Until 1999, there were no explicit stated aims for the National Curriculum. These first appeared in *The National Curriculum: Handbook for Primary Teachers in England Key Stages 1 and 2* (QCA, 1999), which included an explicit statement of values, aims and purposes. It defined the two broad aims of the school curriculum as:

- to provide opportunities for all pupils to learn and achieve; and
- to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social, cultural, physical and mental development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life.

The Foundation Stage and the Key Stage 1 curriculum contain some common elements. The main differences between the two curricula are that the National Curriculum for Key Stage 1 is divided into ten subject areas (mathematics, English, science etc.) with prescribed programmes of study for each, whereas the Foundation Stage curriculum is more integrated and flexible.

Reception and year 1 classes are staffed by a teacher, usually with support from a nursery nurse or teaching assistant, although year 1 teachers often receive this support on a part-time basis.

Transition to school in England

Transition is a process involving moving from one environment and set of relationships to another. Recent theoretical conceptions have emphasised the key influence of educational transition on young children's learning and development and have suggested that early experiences of transition may be particularly influential (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; Fthenakis, 1998; Pianta *et al.*, 1999). Research has also drawn attention to the fact that children face a number of discontinuities in their lives and they need to learn to cope with change (Fthenakis, 1998).

In most European countries, transition to school (commonly at age six) is aligned with a transition from a play-based, exploratory curriculum to a more formal one. In England, children usually make the transition to a school reception class at age four. The transition to a more formal curriculum takes place a year later, when children begin year 1.

The fact that the transition to more formal learning does not coincide with the transition to school in England offers both opportunities and challenges. Potentially, it could make transition to school less difficult for children, as the curriculum requirements in pre-school and school are similar, even though children are moving to a new setting. However, there is a danger that the early years curriculum and pedagogy may be influenced by the requirements of older age-groups and that the subsequent move to year 1 may not be sufficiently recognised as an important transition because it takes place a year after children have started school.

Evidence from research into the transition to school suggests that children do have specific concerns about moving to a new setting. Although the majority of young children feel positive about the transition to school, some have concerns about making friends, understanding rules and routines and the balance between work and play (Clarke and Sharpe, 2003; Corsaro and Molinari, 2000; Dockett and Perry, 2003; Einarsdottir, 2003; Griebel and Niesel, 2000; Potter and Briggs, 2003).

Several qualitative research studies have shown that young children's opportunities to learn through play may be curtailed in English reception classes due to insufficient staff, lack of early years training, physical constraints (small classrooms, lack of facilities for outside play); lack of equipment (especially sand and water and large play equipment) and adherence to primary school timetables (see Barrett, 1986; Sharp, 1988; Sharp and Turner, 1987; West *et al.*, 1990; Cleave and Brown, 1991; Bennett, 1992). Many of these studies took place at the time of rapid increase in schools admitting four-year-olds to infant classes.

The introduction of the Foundation Stage was intended to bring a parity of educational experience for three- and four-year-olds, irrespective of the type of educational setting they attend. Research into the quality of provision for four-year-olds in reception classes has, however, continued to raise some questions about the suitability of provision for four-year-olds. For example, Adams *et al.* (2004) described the reception class year as «ambiguous» because it offers full-time provision for children of pre-statutory age in a school setting. Observations of reception class practice by the researchers suggested that, rather than reflecting the holistic approach of pre-school settings, reception classes were closer to the structure of year 1 (with teacher-led activities and time divided up into lessons). There were limited opportunities for children to play or to engage in sustained interactions with adults and other children. Staff were under pressure to prioritise the acquisition of academic skills (especially reading, writing and numeracy) so that children would be ready for more formal learning, especially the National Curriculum Assessments which take place at age seven.

Transition to more formal education in year 1

In 2004, researchers at the NFER investigated the transition from the Foundation Stage for key stage 1 (Sanders *et al.*, 2005). The researchers made two visits to each of 12 case study schools to enable the team to follow a particular cohort of children as they made the transition to year 1. Seventy children were interviewed during the first visits, during the summer term. The majority of these children (66) were interviewed again during the second visits, during the autumn term. The achieved sample included children from a range of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, reflecting each school's local context and intake.

The findings indicated that the majority of the children coped well with the transition to

year 1. However, the interviews with the children also highlighted the influence of the curriculum and teaching approaches on their enjoyment of learning. Reception children said they enjoyed role play, dressing up and playing outside. They also enjoyed activities involving other children. When asked whether there was anything they did not like, children identified «hard work», especially writing and number work. They disliked periods spent sitting still and listening to the teacher, as one girl said: «I don't like sitting for a long time because it's boring».

For many of the children, the most positive element of moving to year 1 was about «getting bigger» and «growing up» but this was counterbalanced by the negative experience of «doing hard work». There was less choice and fewer opportunities for play-based learning. As one girl said: It is different... In reception we used to dress up and we could play with the dressing-up stuff. We can play in year 1, but not lots of times any more». Children said they spent more time sitting still in year 1 (often associated with so-called «carpet time»). This is illustrated in the following dialogue:

Researcher: *Is there anything you don't like about being in year 1?*

Boy 1: *Being on the carpet for a long time.*

Boy 2: *Neither do I, because it's very boring.*

Boy 1: *And it wastes our time playing.*

Boy 2: *It wastes your life.*

Children were also highly attuned to changes in their physical environment. In the course of their interviews, they frequently described features such as the journey from the school entrance to their classroom, access from the room to outside, the way the classroom was laid out, the amount of space in the room, the pictures on the walls, the seating and the colour scheme.

Where school staff had adopted induction practices (such as ensuring continuity of experience and routine, visits to the new classroom and communication with children and their families before and after the start of the new year), these had a positive impact on children's understanding and experiences of the transition to year 1.

The main changes experienced by children making the transition to year 1 are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Changes experienced by children between the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1

Foundation Stage	Key Stage 1
Play-based	Work-based
Active	Static
Led by adults or children	Directed by adults
Thematic	Subject based
Emphasises a range of skills	Emphasises listening and writing

The research revealed some interesting findings in relation to previous research on the concerns of children starting school. Children making the transition to year 1 within a school were not particularly concerned about understanding rules or making friends because these elements were unaffected by the transition in question. They did mention some changes in their routine, although these were relatively minor in nature. However, issues relating to the curriculum and pedagogy (the balance between work and play, the degree of choice, the amount of time sitting still) were very much to the fore.

Comparing educational provision for six-year-olds in three countries

As well as a focus on four- and five-year-olds, there has been an interest in educational provision for six-year-olds, given that this is a common age for children to start formal schooling in many countries. In 2003, a comparative study considered the educational provision for six-year-olds in England, Denmark and Finland (Ofsted, 2003). In both Finland and Denmark, children started school at the beginning of the year in which they became seven.

The study found that, compared with the other two countries, the English curriculum for six-year-olds was more centralised and closely defined. Teachers in England were less secure about the nature and purpose of the curriculum in year 1. Much more was expected of English six-year-olds in terms of reading, writing and mathematics; less attention was paid to the development of pupils as people. English teachers made greater use of closed questions in whole-class teaching, with relatively little emphasis on speculation or extended interaction. English classrooms were comparatively cramped. Parents in England held diverse views about the kind of education their children should receive, and some expressed concerns about an abrupt change in curriculum following the reception year.

Discussion and conclusion

England has a relatively early school starting age of five years, resulting from a combination of economic and social factors. Although the compulsory age of schooling in other European countries is six or even seven, several countries allow children to start school earlier and a few have changed their compulsory school age recently, all in favour of younger children. Given this trend, it may be interesting for other countries to reflect on the English experience.

Most children in England start school before compulsory age, at four years old. Schools began forming reception classes for four-year-olds in response to parental demand, but this trend was accompanied by concerns about the appropriateness of the school environment, curriculum and pedagogy for young children. More recently, school reception classes have been clearly designated part of pre-school provision even though they are located in schools.

Research evidence suggests that reception classes continue to pose challenges in relation to their ability to offer key features of early childhood provision, especially child-initiated activities, play-based activities and sustained interaction with peers and adults.

Children typically spend a year in the reception class before moving to a more formal curriculum in year 1. Therefore the English education system has effectively divorced the transition to school from the transition to formal education. This means that young children encounter one set of changes when starting school (primarily in relation to the environment, people and routine) and another set (primarily in relation to the curriculum and pedagogy) when they move into year 1. English children appear to make a relatively smooth transition from reception to year 1, especially when assisted by their schools' transition practices. However, children consider aspects of formal education (especially writing and numeracy) to be «hard work». Although most children accept that they will be required to do more hard work as they get older, it is clear from children's comments that the increasing presence of hard work and whole-class instruction experienced by four- and five-year-olds has an impact on their enjoyment and motivation to learn.

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Education in Scotland 3–7 years

— Eileen Carmichael

In Scotland, over the last decade, services for children have undergone major organisational changes. Consequently, during this period, there have also been significant developments in early education and childcare services. These developments have impacted upon the growth, delivery, type of provision and expectations of service providers in terms of their knowledge, skills and understandings in early years practices.

In particular, a great deal of activity has taken place to shape and deliver clear and consistent policies that improve practice and result in high quality learning experiences for children. Some key factors in helping to create the current context for early childhood education in Scotland include:

- 1995, publication of *Performance Indicators and Self-evaluation for Pre-school Centres*
- 1997, publication of *A Curriculum Framework for Children in their Pre-school Year*
- 1999, publication of national guidance *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3–5*
- 2000, publication of *The Child at the Centre: Self-evaluation in the early years*
- 2002, publication of *National Care Standards: early education and childcare up to the age of 16*
- 2004, publication of *A Curriculum for Excellence*
- 2005, publication of *Birth to Three: supporting our youngest children*
- 2006, publication of *Scottish Executive Response to the Report of the Education Committee on the Early Years Inquiry*
- 2006, publication of *National Review of the Early Years and Childcare Workforce: Report and Consultation*.

The Scottish Executive is the devolved government in Scotland and is a separate organisation from the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament passes laws on devolved issues and also scrutinises the work of the Scottish Executive. In January 2005 the Education Committee of the Scottish Parliament agreed to undertake an inquiry into the provision of pre-school education and care across Scotland, and in June 2006 published its report (*The Scottish Parliament Education Committee Report, 2006*, available at www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/committees/education/reports-06/edr06-07.htm). The report exhorts the Scottish Executive to ensure that the highest priority is assigned to children's interests, particularly in supporting children under 3, upskilling the early years workforce, establishing integrated structures and simplifying systems for delivering funding and reporting progress. The Scottish Executive response in August 2006 stated that, while sharing many of the Committee's objectives, there were areas where it saw the route to achieving those objectives slightly differently (*Scottish Executive Response to the Report of the Education Committee on the Early Years Inquiry, 2006*, available at www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/08/17152459/1).

Current position 2007

In Scotland, all 3- and 4-year-olds have been entitled to a free, part-time pre-school education place (412.5 hours each year) since 2002. The provision is made through local authorities working in partnership with the private and voluntary sector. Nursery schools, classes in primary schools and voluntary sector provision open during school hours and terms (9 am – 4 pm over 39 weeks per year). Others, including children's centres, family centres and private sector provision, open for longer each day and year; some take children from birth to 5, others from 3 to 5 years. In January 2006, approximately 98.8 per cent of 4-year-olds and 96 per cent of 3-year-olds were registered for pre-school education.

There were 2761 local authority or partnership pre-school education providers in Scotland, of which 50 reported providing education in Gaelic. The funded 412.5 hours are usually delivered over five sessions per week, each of around 2.5 hours, throughout the school year. Some authorities do have slightly different arrangements and a few providers, mainly in the voluntary sector, cannot always offer the full five sessions a week. Where care is required for more than 412.5 hours, for example to suit parental employment, parents are charged for this care. There is some UK Government support for parental childcare costs but this is less than elsewhere in Europe. Further information is available on www.scotland.gov.uk.

In its guidance to childcare providers the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care states:

«Staff to child ratios for children age three years in non-domestic premises should be 1 to 8. Where children aged three and over attend facilities providing day care for a session which is less than a continuous period of four hours in any day, the adult:child ratio may be 1 to 10, providing individual children do not attend more than one session per day.» www.carecommission.com/images/stories/documents/publications/registrationinspectioncomplaints/guidance_on_staff_child_ratios.pdf

Primary education

Children in Scotland begin their formal education at primary school. Entry to primary school takes place in August after their fifth birthday or if their fifth birthday is reached by February of the following year. Therefore, children in Scotland usually start school when they are aged between 4-and-a-half and 5-and-a-half. Free pre-school education can be extended where parents of children with birthdays in January or February choose to defer their child's entry to primary school. In these cases, local authorities are required to provide an additional free year. Children with September to December birthdays are only able to access an extra year at the discretion of their local authorities. In 2006 there were 4380 children with deferred entry to primary school. Further information is available on www.scotland.gov.uk.

Primary school classes are organised by age into year stages from Primary 1 (age approximately 5 years) to Primary 7 (age approximately 12 years). Generally, primary schools

contain both boys and girls. In 2005 there were 2194 primary schools in Scotland, of which 431 had fewer than 50 pupils. In some small schools, mostly those in rural areas, classes will be composite classes, containing children of several different ages. Each class normally has one teacher who teaches all or most of the curriculum. Currently, the recommended class size in Scotland is 30 for a single stage class P1–P3, and 25 for a composite stage class. The Scottish School Census 2005 shows that the average primary school class size was 23.6 pupils (compared to 23.9 in 2004). Composite classes had an average of 19.9 pupils (compared to 20.2 in 2004). There is a commitment to a class size maximum of 25 from August 2007. Further information is available on www.scotland.gov.uk.

Current Curriculum Guidance

Pre-school

A Curriculum Framework for Children in their Pre-school Year (Scottish Office Education and Industry Department, 1997) and *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5* (Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum / Scottish Executive, 1999) which extended the earlier advice, were based on a recognition of the fundamental importance of the adult role in supporting children's development and learning. They stemmed from the growing awareness of the importance of the quality of early years experiences and a commitment to building a coherent, continuous and progressive educational experience for all children and young people in Scotland. *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5* provides advice and guidance on the learning and development needs of young children. It applies to schools and centres funded to provide the education of children aged 3–5 in Scotland. There is a recognition of the role parents play in education, the learning which takes place prior to pre-school, and the learning taking place outside early years settings. It is based on the four principles of:

- the best interests of children
- the central importance of relationships
- the need for all children to feel included
- an understanding of the ways in which children learn.

The guidance has sections on:

- the importance of pre-school education
- key aspects of children's development and learning:
 - emotional, personal and social development
 - communication and language
 - knowledge and understanding of the world
 - expressive and aesthetic development
 - physical development and movement
- promoting effective learning
- children as individuals.

It contains examples from practice to exemplify each key aspect. The interconnected-

ness of the key aspects and the holistic nature of learning for young children are stressed throughout. Providers of local authority-funded education are required to observe these guidelines. However, each centre will have its own distinctive approach to the implementation of the curriculum framework so that it is implemented in a way appropriate to the needs of the children who attend.

Early years information and communications technology

Early years information and communications technology (ICT) has also been a rapid area of development for early years education in Scotland. In 2001 Learning and Teaching Scotland was asked by the Scottish Executive to carry out a review of the role of ICT in early years. *Early Learning, Forward Thinking: The Policy Framework for ICT in Early Years* (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2003), Scotland's national strategy for ICT in early years, is now in place, and a current focus of the HMIE inspection process is to ascertain the degree to which the national ICT strategy is influencing thinking and practice within early years establishments across Scotland. More information is available on www.LTScotland.org.uk/earlyyears.

Transition to primary schooling

Current research in Scotland illustrates that «transition to primary school has been the focus of considerable international research activity and policy innovation, yet it remains a topic of concern» (Stephen, 2006, p. 6). Stephen concludes that there is no right age for launching into a formal school career and believes that there is international recognition for a distinct 3 to 6 phase of education, identifying widespread support for features of early education as crucial for children's learning, including:

- a holistic view of learning and the learner
- active, experiential learning
- respect for children's ability to be self-motivating and self-directing
- valuing responsive interactions between children and adults.

Over recent years, a range of approaches has been adopted in pre-school establishments and primary schools across Scotland to secure smooth and positive transitions for children. These include open days, staff exchange visits, regular staff communication and written progress records from nursery to primary. Some primary schools have welcome materials for nursery children produced by primary pupils themselves. Transition from a nursery class within a primary school can appear seamless as it is often simply a move to the next room. Some primary schools can receive children from a large number of pre-school establishments just as some pre-school establishments can send children to a large number of primary schools. *Curriculum for Excellence* is addressing transition issues by focusing on continuity of experience, learning and curriculum between home, the pre-school setting and the early years of primary school. Within the new curriculum framework, the *early level* designates ages 3 to 6 years as the first key level for development and

learning. Increasingly, joint staff development opportunities are available, bringing pre-school and early primary staff together. It is also becoming more common for teaching staff to work with the same group of children from pre-school into early primary.

Ensuring Effective Transition (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2006) highlights the conditions in which effective transition arrangements can be developed and evaluated. The aims behind the report are to encourage effective, high quality transition, not only from pre-school to primary, but also from stage to stage, including primary to secondary education. More information is available at www.hmie.gov.uk.

Primary

The *5–14 Curriculum Guidelines* (Scottish Office Education Department, 1991) for Scottish local authorities and schools cover the structure, content and assessment of the current curriculum in primary schools and in the first two years of secondary education. The aim of the 5–14 programme has been to promote the teaching of a broad, coherent and balanced curriculum that offers all pupils continuity and progression as they move through school. More information is available at www.LTScotland.org.uk/5to14. The content is divided into five broad curricular areas: language, mathematics, environmental studies, expressive arts and religious and moral education with attainment outcomes for each strand of learning within these areas. Children are formally assessed at a specific level when the teacher judges the level has been achieved. Teachers will judge a child's progress through levels from A to F on the basis of ongoing assessment through observations and evaluation of coursework. Teachers' judgements are supported by national assessments.

Current Curricular Review

Education in Scotland is currently pursuing its biggest curriculum reform programme for a generation under the Scottish Executive's *Ambitious, Excellent Schools* agenda.

Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004) is central to this reform agenda. It involves a major review of the current curriculum and the development of:

- a coherent curriculum for children from 3 to 18 years
- greater choice and opportunity for pupils
- more autonomy for teachers.

The review is a continuous process of professional learning and development and not a one-off change. It is about the development of a framework that will support all children and young people from 3 to 18 years to develop as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. *Curriculum for Excellence* recognises that learning and teaching are at the heart of effective learning and so there is less focus on content and more on the 'how' of classroom practice. It challenges those working in education to plan and act in new ways. It will result in changes to the:

- organisation of the curriculum in our schools and centres

- qualifications system
- recognition of wider achievement
- improvement framework.

National Debate on Education

In 2002 the Scottish Executive embarked on an extensive consultation exercise on the state of school education - the 'National Debate on Education'.

The Debate confirmed that a number of features of the present Scottish curriculum are highly valued. These include the flexibility which already exists in the system, the commitment to breadth and balance in the curriculum, the quality of teaching and, importantly, the principle of comprehensive education. However, the results of the Debate also indicated areas for change and improvement. These included reducing what was viewed as overcrowding in the curriculum, making learning more enjoyable and making better connections between the stages in the curriculum from 3 to 18. We also needed to focus more on vocational experiences and provide pupils with a better balance of academic and vocational subjects.

The Curriculum Review Group

In response to the National Debate, Ministers established the Curriculum Review Group in November 2003. Its task was to identify the purposes of education for the 3 to 18 age range and determine the key principles to be applied in redesigning the curriculum. Its work resulted in the publication in November 2004 of *A Curriculum for Excellence: The Curriculum Review Group* (Scottish Executive, 2004), which was welcomed by the Scottish Executive. The report states that «our aspiration for all children and for every young person is that they should be:

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- responsible citizens
- effective contributors.

It is proposed that learning will take place through a wide range of planned experiences. These will include environmental, scientific, technological, historical, social, economic, political, mathematical and linguistic contexts, the arts, culture and sports. Sometimes the experiences may be linked to particular vocational or other specialised contexts. To achieve this breadth will require both subject-based studies and activities which span several disciplines. There are eight curriculum areas: health and wellbeing; languages; mathematics; science; social studies; expressive arts; technologies; and religious and moral education. Children will learn through the day-to-day experiences of the life of the school community, with its values and social contact, and from out-of-school activities, events and celebrations. Taken together, these experiences should provide a motivating and enriching blend.

Principles for curriculum design

The following principles are to underpin the new curriculum framework:

- Challenge and enjoyment
- Breadth
- Progression
- Depth
- Personalisation and choice
- Coherence
- Relevance

Although all should apply at any one stage, the principles will have different emphases as a young person learns and develops. So, for example, the need for breadth will apply very strongly in the earlier stages, to ensure that a child will gain knowledge and understanding across a wide range of areas of learning. More options for specialisation will be available later, once essential outcomes have been achieved. The nature of choice will also change as a child develops, for example starting with choices in play activities, moving through choices in topics and contexts for learning and eventually reaching opportunities for decisions between programmes which may have implications for subsequent careers.

During the 2007–08 school year, work will begin on planning for the implementation of *Curriculum for Excellence*. Implementation will begin in the 2008–09 school year, and from 2009–10 all pre-school centres and schools across Scotland will be working on the delivery of the new curriculum. Further information can be found on www.curriculum-forexcellencescotland.gov.uk/index.asp

Early years practice

Among the many aims for *Curriculum for Excellence*, those with special significance for early years practitioners are as follows.

- Guidelines should create a single, coherent, Scottish curriculum 3–18 to ensure smooth transitions (nursery to primary and primary to secondary) and a continuum of learning.
- The approaches which are used in pre-school education should be extended into the early years of primary schooling.
- All children should experience a smooth change as they move from their pre-school experience into Primary 1.
- The importance of opportunities for children to learn through purposeful, well planned play should be emphasised.

Schools that have already implemented a more active-based approach to learning report that children are better motivated and more engaged in their learning. While there is, as yet, no research evidence to support rises in attainment, staff perceive improvements in

the rate of children's achievements. «Closing the Gap» action research carried out by Hayward and Hedge (2004, p9) exemplified that learners learn most effectively when they have confidence in their own abilities, «when they believe they can learn, know what, why and how to learn, when they have a sense of purpose and when learning is as close to real life as possible».

Inclusive approaches

In November 2005 a new law, the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, came into place to secure additional support for every child or young person with specific support needs. The Act also legislates for increased parental involvement and a requirement that schools and educational establishments recognise the principles of involvement and provide accordingly. The Act focuses on getting it right for every child by intervening at the earliest stages, promoting collaborative working across services for children and strengthening the duty placed upon local authorities to take due regard of the child's views. Whilst the overall aim is for full integration and inclusion of all children in mainstream establishments, it is recognised that some children may have particular needs which are better met in establishments offering more specialised and individual care and education.

Quality Assurance

Pre-school

In both *The Child at the Centre: self-evaluation in the early years* (Scottish Executive, 2000) and the *National Care Standards: early education and childcare up to the age of 16* (Scottish Executive, 2002), education and care are emphasised as an indivisible whole, with a clear emphasis on safeguarding children. Regulation and inspection play an important role in both influencing provision and creating expectations of educators in terms of skills, knowledge and understanding. Further information can be found at www.carecommission.com.

The Report on the Integrated Inspection of Early Education and Childcare Services in Scotland (HM Inspectorate of Education and the Care Commission, 2006) highlighted that inspections in pre-school establishments across Scotland have helped to raise standards and increase consistency in the sector. More information can be found at www.hmie.gov.uk.

Following concerns about the frequency of inspections, establishments catering for children aged 3–5 years only, evaluated as providing high quality provision and with sound approaches to self-evaluation, will no longer require annual inspection.

Improving Scottish Education (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2006, p. 8) reported that inspections over the past three years showed that pre-school providers were generally very successful at ensuring that children were very well cared for. In most cases, they also

ensured that children engaged effectively in their learning and made a sound start across a range of important areas. Children generally learned to work and play well with other children in pre-school centres, and they did so in settings which were characterised by fun and enjoyment. Some improvement is needed, however, in the quality of talk and interaction between adults and children to ensure that all children's learning needs are met fully. In a significant number of centres, particularly in the private and voluntary sectors, the quality of leadership and of other factors dependent on leadership needs to improve.

Primary

Overall, the primary sector performs well. There is an established culture of self-evaluation using the set of quality indicators within *How Good is Our School?* (HM Inspectorate of Education). The third edition, *How Good is Our School? The journey to excellence, part 3*, was published in March 2007.

Improving Scottish Education (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2006, p. 22) reports that primary schools responded to a range of opportunities and challenges resulting from a number of pieces of legislation and policy initiatives, each of which required school staff to review their expectations and improve their knowledge and skills. It comments that the entry into P1 of children with at least one year of pre-school education, coupled with a stronger emphasis on early interventions to support pupils, has raised teachers' expectations of what pupils in the early stages of primary can achieve.

Overall, staff in primary schools have a good track record in making sure that pupils' pastoral needs are well met, resulting in pupils who are well looked after and happy to be at school. Their effectiveness in meeting the learning needs of all pupils is more variable. However, the attainment of children in early primary is seen as a strength. The generally good quality of learning and teaching, and of leadership in most schools, provides a secure basis for further improvement.

Professional development and training

In January 2006, there were 12,544 staff providing pre-school education. There is a wide demand for flexible and creative professional training to meet the diverse needs of the range of early years practitioners, including childminders, playleaders, classroom assistants, out-of-school care staff, early years educators, primary and nursery teachers. Further information is available at www.scotland.gov.uk.

Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) requirements for a trained workforce by 2009 will put pressure on staff to be qualified to a variety of levels depending on position, role and responsibility. The SSSC also clearly highlights the growing need for evidence of ongoing professional development activity. More information is available at www.sssc.gov.uk.

Through the *National Review of the Early Years and Childcare Workforce* (2006), the Scottish Executive is committed to ensuring that the employment opportunities for workers in the sector are improved and that the status of the sector is raised. The Review identi-

fied three main themes that will guide all of the changes that will affect the early years and childcare sector in the future. Those themes are leadership, worker development and flexibility to allow the delivery of services that meet the needs of children and families in local communities. A flexible workforce which is able to work in different settings and with different professionals is seen as essential to deliver integrated and changing services. For further details see www.scotland.gov.uk.

Investing in Children's Futures, the Scottish Executive Response (2006) to the Report, stated that the key actions Ministers intend to take are:

- Developing leadership in the early years and childcare sector by creating a workforce that is led by degree (or a work-based equivalent) qualified professionals.
- Creating a genuine career structure for the workforce where career progression and development is supported by a qualifications and professional development framework.
- Providing additional resources to support private and voluntary sector providers of pre-school education to invest in their workforces to improve the retention of experienced and qualified staff and to support their workforce to develop to meet the new professional status when it is developed.

The BA Childhood Studies degree has been in existence for several years and can be taken as full- or part-time study. Many holding nursery nurse qualifications have taken this additional higher level of study and then gone on to take a postgraduate primary teaching qualification.

Nursery teachers, a group who are not included in the above review, are required to hold a primary teaching qualification, either a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree or a Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). Many have undertaken additional qualifications specific to teaching young children. Those working in local authority nursery schools and classes are required to be registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). In 2006, there were 1 648 full-time equivalent GCTS-registered teachers working in local authority or partnership pre-school education centres, some 1 6.5 per cent of total staff. More information is available at www.scotland.gov.uk.

Teachers in primary schools are required to hold a BEd degree or Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in primary teaching, covering ages 3–12. All teachers working in local authority primary schools are required to be registered with the GTCS, the body responsible since 1965 for the independent regulation of the teaching profession in Scotland. Further information is available at www.gtcs.org.uk. In addition there are around 8000 teaching assistants, who undertake a range of administrative and support for learning tasks under the direction of classroom teachers. More information is available at www.scotland.gov.uk.

Salary and conditions

Following the publication of the McCrone Report, *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* (Scottish Executive, 2000), teachers (nursery, primary, special and secondary) now have a 22.5 hours weekly teaching maximum, over 195 days per year, a commitment

to 35 hours continuing professional development annually and the opportunity to remain as classroom teachers while being recognised as knowledgeable professionals with enhanced salary. By contrast, conditions of non-teaching staff remain poor: staff have a longer week, often 35 hours with children also in the building, and a requirement of 60 hours of professional development over five years. Salaries for other staff are set locally, are much lower than those of teachers and in the private and voluntary sector are more likely to reflect the national minimum wage. More details are available at www.scotland.gov.uk.

Influences in early education

Traditions of early childhood education in Scotland are long, going back to Robert Owen (1771–1858), a wealthy mill and factory owner, who had a clear vision for an astonishingly progressive and enlightened system of education which he believed to be key to a happier society and universal harmony. Owen opened the first nursery in New Lanark in 1809. This was followed in 1817 by his school for children between the ages of 1 and 10. Owen's vision stated that children should be provided with opportunities to share, be kind to each other and be curious and ask questions, with an emphasis on teaching practices based on encouragement and an understanding of the whole child – a view totally consistent with modern approaches to the education of young children.

Today, we in Scotland are striving to design an excellent educational experience for all our children that will equip them well to meet the demands of life in the 21st century, The work of Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bowlby, Isaacs, Bruner continues to shape practice. Influences from home include Trevarthen, Donaldson, Prout and Watt. We are also giving attention to international curricular developments: Te Whariki; High/Scope; and Reggio Emilia.

As Scottish education moves forward, the vision, optimism and confidence of Robert Owen continue to inspire:

«It is therefore, the interest of all, that every one, from birth, should be well educated, physically and mentally, that society may be improved in its character, – that everyone should be beneficially employed, physically and mentally, that the greatest amount of wealth may be created, and knowledge attained, – that everyone should be placed in the midst of those external circumstances that will produce the greatest number of pleasurable sensations, through the longest life, that man may be made truly intelligent, moral and happy, and be thus prepared to enter upon the coming Millennium» (Robert Owen, 1841).

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Negotiating an appropriate early years pedagogy using a «show and tell» strategy

— Arlene Forster and Dr. Sarah FitzPatrick

Introduction

In the Republic of Ireland, early childhood is defined as the period from birth to six years of age. The upper age limit reflects statutory school starting age (Coolahan, 1998; Ireland, 1999a). Yet, approximately 50% of four year old children and almost all five year old children are enrolled in state primary schools (OECD, 2004). Prior to attending primary school, many children spend time in one or a combination of other early childhood settings. These include family care (childminding) settings, full-day care and sessional settings¹, as well as the child's own home.

The Education Act (1998) gives the NCCA responsibility for advising the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum and assessment matters across the early childhood period. In fulfilling this remit, the NCCA supports practitioners who work across the range of early childhood settings by providing information on many aspects of practice – pedagogy being one.

This paper outlines how the NCCA plans to continue this work in the short- to medium-term. The paper begins by exploring the philosophical background to the two national curricula for early childhood education. It then describes the current curriculum and environmental contexts, and summarises pedagogical practice across the early childhood sector. Following this, the paper provides an outline of how the NCCA plans to share and promote good pedagogical practice with practitioners² using a «show and tell» strategy.

The curriculum context

At present, the Republic of Ireland has no national framework to guide adults in supporting children's learning and development from birth through to six years. Instead, there is a variety of curricula and curriculum materials for different stages in early childhood. Many organisations have developed their own curriculum guidelines which are used in a range of settings³. There are also a number of national curriculum developments. The *Primary School Curriculum* (1999b) is used by practitioners to support children's learn-

¹ Sessional settings usually provide up to 3.5 hours of early childhood education and care for children. This is provided either in the morning or in the afternoon.

² For the purposes of this paper, the NCCA uses the term *practitioners* to refer to all those who work in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings. Practitioners may have a diversity of experience and qualifications ranging from unaccredited through to postgraduate level.

³ These settings include family care (childminding) settings, nurseries, crèches, parent-and-toddler groups, playgroups, pre-schools, hospital settings and after-school settings.

ing during the first two of their eight years in primary school. Other national curriculum materials include the *Curricular Guidelines for the Early Start Pre-School Intervention Project* (1998). The Early Start Project tackles educational disadvantage by targeting children in the year preceding entry to primary school – three to four year old children.

The absence of national curriculum guidelines for the period from birth to six years was discussed at the National Forum on Early Childhood Education (1998). This forum provided the first opportunity at a public level to focus on provision for children during the first six years of their lives. A number of recommendations presented in *Ready to Learn*, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999a), focused on the need to address the gap in curriculum development particularly for very young children. The recommendations concerned:

The development of guidelines on developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education ... [which] ... have regard to the need to provide a range of experiences and learning opportunities to enhance all aspects of a child's development – cognitive, emotional, linguistic, moral, physical, sensory and social. They will also take account of the need for structure and for learning through play ...

(Ready to Learn, 1999a, pp. 56–57)

Responding to the recommendations and following a national and international review of curricula and curriculum guidelines, the NCCA advised the Minister for Education and Science on the development of a single national curriculum framework for the whole early childhood period from birth to six years (NCCA, 2001). This framework is referred to as the *Framework for Early Learning*⁴ which is due to be published in spring 2008.

A year later in 2002, the NCCA began planning for a rolling review of the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999b). Phase 1 of this review commenced in the 2003/2004 school year and involved gathering information from practitioners, children and parents on their experiences with the curriculum in classrooms, for three subjects—English, mathematics and visual arts. Given the focus of both projects on early childhood education, the development of the *Framework for Early Learning* and Phase 1 of the review of the *Primary School Curriculum* complemented and informed each other.

The environmental context

A rapidly changing early childhood sector and a growing public awareness of the importance of the early childhood years in children's lives have strengthened the rationale for supporting the sector in develop an appropriate early years pedagogy. In addition, increased funding; the creation of regional structures to co-ordinate the provision of early childhood education; and the development of *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for*

⁴ On occasions throughout this paper, the *Framework for Early Learning* is referred to as the *Framework*.

Early Childhood Education (2006) by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE); have helped to elevate early childhood education to the national policy agenda. These developments have also spotlighted the importance of quality of provision for children's learning and development within individual settings, and the role of pedagogy in improving quality.

Policy changes have also impacted on the development of the *Framework*. Most notable amongst these was the Republic of Ireland's ratification in 1992 of the *United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC). Another significant development was the launch of the *National Children's Strategy: Our Children, Their Lives* (Ireland, 2000). The strategy presented a vision of childhood which emphasised the importance of enabling children to experience a fulfilling childhood to help them realise their full potential. Finally, in September 2004, the OECD review team published their «short-review» of early childhood policies and services in the Republic of Ireland. The report made key observations about pedagogy which are referred to later in the paper.

The place of pedagogy in national curricula

In outlining the NCCA's work in negotiating an appropriate early years pedagogy through a «show and tell» strategy, it is important to clarify the understanding of pedagogy informing this work. Furthermore, it is helpful to explore the emphasis which both the *Framework for Early Learning* and the *Primary School Curriculum* place on pedagogy.

Mortimore (1999) described pedagogy as «any conscious action by one person designed to enhance learning in another» (p. 3). Taking a similar view, Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2002) defined pedagogy as concerning teaching and providing instructive learning environments and routines.

These interpretations show the adult in a central role – shaping and nurturing children's early learning and development. In a consultation to inform the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*, the sector endorsed a proactive role for the adult in providing for, extending and enriching children's early learning and development (NCCA, 2005a). Alongside this endorsement, the sector identified the need for the NCCA to develop practical examples of how adults can support and facilitate children's learning and development.

The *Framework* and the *Primary School Curriculum* highlight a proactive role for the adult in supporting children's learning. The importance of this role is captured in the principles of children's learning and development in the two curricula as follows.

Framework for Early Learning

Relationships

Children learn and develop through loving and nurturing relationships with adults and other children. The adult has an important role to play in influencing what and how they learn.

Active learning

Much of children's early learning and development takes place through play and first-hand experiences. ... These experiences help them to manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop physically and socially, to be creative and imaginative, and to lay the foundations for becoming readers and writers.

(NCCA, 2007a, pp. 11–12)

Primary School Curriculum

The role of the teacher

The quality of the relationship that the teacher establishes with the child is of paramount importance in the learning process. The teacher's concern for the well-being and the successful development of the child is the basis for the creation of a supportive environment that can facilitate the child's learning.

The child as an active agent in his or her learning

It is an underlying principle of the curriculum that the child should be an active agent in his or her own learning. The structure and content of the curriculum are designed to provide opportunities for active engagement in a wide range of learning experiences and to encourage children to respond in a variety of ways to particular content and teaching strategies.

(Ireland, 1999b, p. 20 and 14)

These principles support a pedagogy which values and respects the child as a learner and recognises the importance of giving the child a degree of autonomy in shaping his/her own learning. The two curricula also place a professional responsibility on the practitioner to provide appropriate activities and experiences which are meaningful and enjoyable whilst challenging the child to learn new things.

The reality of pedagogical practice in early years settings

Pedagogy as described in national curricula, does not automatically translate into practice. So, what is the current reality in early childhood settings in the Republic of Ireland?

Pedagogy as experienced by children in primary schools

In a report entitled, *An Evaluation of Curriculum Implementation in Primary Schools: English, Mathematics and Visual Arts* (2005) the Department of Education and Science (DES) presented findings from evaluations in 86 primary schools in the 2003/2004 school year. The DES noted that an over-emphasis on textbooks resulted in some teaching being didactic and children being given undemanding and repetitive tasks. In addition, the Department commented that « ... in more than two-thirds of classrooms there was still

an over-reliance on whole-class teaching, where teacher talk dominated and where pupils worked silently on individual tasks for excessive periods» (2005, p. 30). The DES recommended that teachers should develop a detailed knowledge of appropriate teaching methodologies.

In a review of the same three subjects, the NCCA concluded that teachers' ownership of the child-centred theories underpinning the *Primary School Curriculum*, contrasted with their limited ownership of child-centred teaching and learning methods (NCCA, 2005b). Findings showed that teachers required much greater exemplification of teaching and learning methods so that they could extend their repertoire.

In that same review (NCCA, 2005b) children spoke of their love of learning through play and indicated that they would like more opportunities to learn in this way. Five to six year old children described how much they missed play, «the only thing I don't like doing is when I can't play with the toys». The following excerpt from an interview with a group of the children demonstrated this point further.

Interviewer: Were there things that you did in Early Start every day that you miss?

Respondent: I used to always dress up as a Fireman and I miss that.

Interviewer: Is that because you wanted to be a Fireman?

Respondent: I wanted to be one then, but now I want to be a footballer 'cos I play football.

Respondent: [I miss] dressing up as well. Because I would dress up as a dancer 'cos I want to be a dancer when I grow up and a singer.

(NCCA, 2005b, p. 199)

The absence of play as reported by children reflected the predominance of a more traditional, teacher dominated pedagogy in classrooms in Ireland. The OECD (2004) made similar findings as discussed later in the paper.

References to discontinuities in pedagogy and in particular in relation to a play pedagogy were also identified by O'Kane and Hayes (2007). Using small group discussions, O'Kane and Hayes asked children about their favourite thing to do at school. The majority of the responses focused on play: «Playing! Playing is the best thing to do.» The children identified Friday as their playday as they had opportunities for free-play. The following excerpts illustrate their love of playing as a way of learning and their preference for it over a more teacher-directed pedagogy:

Interviewer: Can you tell me what is your favourite thing to do at school?

Child 1: I like colouring. I love playdays too.

Child 2: I like playdays too.

Child 3: I like playdays too.

Interviewer: You all seem to like the playdays! ...

Interviewer: So, if you could choose one thing at school to do more of, what would that be?

Child 4: We love our workbooks, don't we [name of child]?

Child 1: *I hate it.*

Child 2: *So do I.*

Child 2: *I hate every book except maths. I hate school.*

Child 1: *So do I except Fridays.*

Child 2: *I like Fridays and Saturdays.*

(O’Kane & Hayes, 2007, p. 5)

When asked about the differences between preschool and primary school, the children spoke again about play: «... in playschool you play with toys every day, and in school you don’t». O’Kane and Hayes suggested that having autonomy to make their own decisions about what to play with, who to play with, and how to play, was valued highly by the children. Similarly, NCCA (2005b) found that the level of choice afforded to children in their learning was positively related to their level of engagement with learning.

The *Primary School Curriculum* promotes active learning and using the child’s sense of wonder and interests as a base for learning. Yet, in contrast to this pedagogical vision, Hayes (2003) found that infant class teachers spent 85% of their time teaching in an adult-centred way. In their review of early childhood education and care policy in Ireland, the OECD team was equally critical of pedagogical practice in infant classrooms in primary schools. In their report (2004), the team concluded that the pedagogy used in infant classrooms:

appeared to be directive and formal compared to practices observed and theoretically underpinned in various other countries, where more explicit emphasis is placed on exploratory learning and self-initiated, hands-on (as opposed to table-top) activities.

(OECD, 2004, pp. 58-59)

They made similar comments about the pedagogy they observed in Early Start settings:

[the pedagogy was] not focussed on the observed interests of children but sought to interest them in the concerns of the teacher. «Open framework» programmes, which, internationally meet with wide acceptance, were not in evidence.

(OECD, 2004, p. 59)

Pedagogy as experienced by children in «other» settings

Pedagogical challenges are not unique to the experiences of four to six year olds in infant classes in primary schools. The OECD (2004) also commented negatively about the quality of provision generally for children aged from approximately six months to four years in settings other than primary schools. The team concluded that there was:

insufficient understanding of how to interact with and stimulate young children ... there was again an observable emphasis on table-top games, puzzles and work cards rather than on inter-active, self-directed learning. ... In reality, outdoor facilities were generally token, and pedagogical activities that encouraged children to explore the outdoors and nature were not in evidence.

(OECD, 2004, p. 59)

In a background paper commissioned by the NCCA, Hayes commented:

In the Irish context it appears, from the limited research available, that for the older pre-school age group the academic, adult-directed approach predominates in primary school classrooms and the activity or play-based approach predominates in preschools ...

(2007, p. 23)

Considering these pedagogical challenges, Hayes concluded that

Finding a way to balance the two approaches across the range of settings for children from birth to six years that captures the dynamic, continuous process of education in practice – for both the child and the adult – is a challenge for early education.

(2007, p. 23)

The next part of this paper focuses on meeting this challenge.

Influencing pedagogy using a «show and tell» strategy

As this paper has outlined, practitioners across early childhood settings subscribe to the theory of an appropriate early years pedagogy. Yet, they experience challenges in demonstrating this pedagogy in their daily interactions with children as identified by practitioners themselves:

... specific and concrete examples of children's learning and of how the theory can be translated into practice are required. Participants recommended that these examples indicate explicitly how children's learning can be extended and enriched on a day-to-day basis.

(NCCA, 2005a, p. 57)

The NCCA is using multi-layered strategy – a «show and tell» strategy, to help practitioners address these challenges. This involves the NCCA in two main activities:

- describing good early years pedagogy in guidelines supported by descriptions of practice from across the range of settings.
- showcasing good early years pedagogy by using multi-media formats and sharing these using ICT.

Both the guidelines and the examples of good practice are based on the understanding that:

adults have the power to make a major difference to children's lives and their development by what they offer to children and by how they behave towards them.

(Lindon, 1993, p. 75)

This understanding sees the adult as an enabler of the child's learning and emphasises his/her responsibility to actively listen to and observe children in order to empower them to have a greater role in their own learning. This is of particular importance considering how critical self-motivation is for life-long learning. The adults' role also highlights the social nature of early learning as described by Bruner and Haste:

...we have begun to think again of the child as a social being—one who plays and talks with others, learns through interactions with parents/guardians and teachers...through social life, the child acquires a framework for integrating experience, and learning how to negotiate meaning...

(1987, p. 1)

Another important dimension to an appropriate early years pedagogy is the intended impact on children's learning and development. Hayes (2007) identified some of the features of effective learning. She referred to the work of Resnick and Nelson-Le Gall (1997) who concluded that children who are «intelligent-in-practice» have a variety of problem-solving skills and good intuitions about when to use them; they know how to ask questions, seek help and get enough information to solve problems and have dispositions which result in them using these different skills and abilities to learn and develop. Hayes (2007) characterised an appropriate early years pedagogy as a «nurturing» pedagogy and contended that such a pedagogy was underpinned by «respect for the child as a participating partner in the learning process» (2007, p. 28).

Based on these conceptions of an appropriate pedagogy and the resulting role for the adult, the paper now explores briefly each of the two activities in the «show and tell» strategy – describing and showcasing.

Describing an appropriate pedagogy

The *Framework for Early Learning* includes a suite of guidelines to support practitioners in developing how they work with children to enable them to become «intelligent-in-practice» (Resnick & Nelson-Le Gall, 1997). This suite includes guidelines on:

- developing adult/child interaction strategies
- using play as a context for learning
- planning for and assessing children's learning
- building partnerships with parents/families.

The first two sets of guidelines are the vehicle for describing an appropriate early years pedagogy. Based on an extensive review of literature some of which is documented by Hayes (2007) and French (2007), the first set of guidelines presents a range of strategies which adults can use to enhance and extend children's learning and development. These are grouped under four headings:

- Relationships for learning
- Enabling learning
- Instructing for learning
- Organising for learning.

The guidelines on adult/child interactions briefly outline the purpose of each strategy within each group enabling the practitioner to make more informed decisions about

when to intervene in children's learning, how to intervene and how to use the interventions for the child's benefit. Drawing on the work of many researchers including Dockett and Fleer (1999), Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2002), Siraj-Blatchford *et al* (2002) and the BERA Group (2003), the guidelines describe five strategies in detail. These include democratising, modelling, open-ended questioning, structuring and sustained shared thinking. The descriptions are supported by examples of the strategies «in action» with children of different ages and at different stages in early childhood, and across different settings. The purpose of the examples is to help bring the descriptions alive and to show what they might look like when used as part of adult/child interactions in authentic learning situations.

The guidelines on play are also informed by an extensive review of literature which is documented by Kernan (forthcoming). The guidelines give particular attention to the adult's role in using play as a context for learning. They describe how the practitioner can adapt what he/she does in order to reflect the changing abilities, strengths, interests and needs of children as they learn and grow throughout early childhood. For example, the guidelines highlight the importance of the adult providing a secure base for babies and toddlers to play, and to be attuned to their motivation to play. In the case of three to six year old children, the guidelines provide examples of how the adult can use pretend play to help children develop social, meta-cognitive and meta-communicative skills. As with the guidelines on adult/child interaction strategies, examples of play in action are included to help practitioners visualise an effective early years pedagogy.

Showcasing an appropriate pedagogy

The NCCA has developed a suite of three websites to support teaching and learning across educational settings including those in the early childhood sector. The first of these is NCCA's corporate website, available at: www.ncca.ie. It provides information on the NCCA, current projects and publications including consultative documents, commissioned research and reports. The second is the curriculum online website, available at www.curriculumonline.ie which provides access to curriculum documents including the *Primary School Curriculum*. Following its publication in 2008, the *Framework for Early Learning* will be accessible on this site.

ACTION (Assessment, Curriculum and Teaching Innovation on the Net) represents the third of the NCCA's websites. The ACTION website has been designed to exemplify teaching and learning in different settings, and to encourage teachers to use this on-line environment for planning and assessing and for teaching and learning. As ACTION's name suggests, this site will concentrate on «showing» rather than «telling» the features of effective teaching and learning in different educational settings. The site will engage early childhood practitioners with teaching scenarios, resources and solutions which support and extend the *Framework for Early Learning*. ACTION will exhibit examples of good pedagogy across these different settings through media such as text, video and photographs. This multi-media approach will help practitioners to reflect on and tailor their pedagogy so that it better suits the children in their settings. The examples will be gathered from

children and practitioners and will complement the guidelines on interaction strategies and on play included in the *Framework for Early Learning*. The architecture for the ACTION website has been developed and initial work is available at: <http://action.ncca.ie/>.

Conclusion

Findings from research (Hayes, 2003; OECD, 2004; DES, 2005; NCCA, 2005b; O’Kane & Hayes, 2007) have highlighted the predominance of a traditional, practitioner-directed pedagogy in working with young children. This is most notable in settings for three to six year old children. The extent of this traditional adult-directed pedagogy necessitates supports for practitioners for the purpose of making learning a more enjoyable and fulfilling experience for children.

The NCCA will use a «show and tell» strategy to support practitioners in moving towards a more child-centred pedagogy. Guidelines for the *Framework for Early Learning* will *describe* in detail the defining features of good pedagogical practice. In addition, the ACTION website will *demonstrate* good practice—showing what adult/child interactions look like and sound like in a range of early learning settings, thus demystifying this process for practitioners.

These two resources (which describe and demonstrate practice), should empower adults working with young children to become *reflective practitioners* (Schon, 1987) – reviewing and reflecting on their own practices as processes of inquiry. Ultimately, the NCCA’s work should support practitioners in revising their practice to better meet children’s needs including enabling children to make choices about their own learning and to experience enjoyment and fulfilment in learning.

Ongoing curriculum review will enable the NCCA to ascertain whether, to what extent and to what effects, this «show and tell» strategy supports the emergence of a more child-centre early years pedagogy across the early childhood sector in the Republic of Ireland.

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Early Childhood Education in the Netherlands: The first steps

— Susan McKenney, Jos Letschert and Jo Kloprogge

Introduction

Spanning a period of eight years, from age four to twelve, Dutch primary education is among the minority of systems worldwide that integrate the education of younger children into the primary school. This chapter begins by describing the genesis of the current structure of Dutch primary education. It explains the arguments for integrating kindergarten into the primary school, and the initial hurdles experienced. In light of current national debate regarding the establishment formal linkages between the education and care of even younger children (aged two to four) and primary schools, this chapter also describes the current system of preschool education as well as curricula for children in the two to six year age range. Finally, it features a discussion of major opportunities and threats posed by the current structures, along with the rationale behind our call for the harmonization of Dutch preschool and primary education systems.

The structures of schooling in the Netherlands

A brief history of Dutch kindergarten

After 30 years of formally separate schooling, the Dutch education system integrated kindergarten classes into a new, eight-year primary schooling system in 1985. The unification idea was initially proposed by the Dutch teacher's association (the forerunner of the current teachers' union). The main reason behind this new movement was the enormous number of grade repeaters following the transition from nursery school into first grade.

For several reasons, the integration was met with initial resistance. First, teachers of four and five year olds feared that the integration with the primary school might prompt the loss of essential characteristics of their classrooms, such as: (1) attention for social development of children, especially through attention and time for play; and (2) developing the independence, stimulated by work corners, being able to choose and clean up one's own material, and flexible forms of collaboration. Second, many teachers feared that inappropriate performance pressure would be placed on children too early (learning to read, learning to count) as a result of integrating classes in the primary school. And indirectly, a dominant concern was that those activities would press the more developmentally appropriate ones out of the already fully-packed curriculum.

Such concerns were, in part, fed by the fact that teacher qualifications were not adjusted as part of the integration. Primary school teachers held a higher degree than nursery school teachers (those teaching four-five year olds). At the time of the integration, primary school teachers were automatically granted the qualifications to teach the four

and five year olds; whereas nursery school teachers were not granted the qualifications to teach upper grades in the primary school. Those wishing to teach older children were required to complete a special bridge course. The concern was that teachers from the older grades would take over the kindergarten classes, using the more teacher-centered and subject-dependent approaches to which they were accustomed. Finally, much resistance also stemmed from simultaneous budget cuts in education.

In hindsight, most would likely say that the concerns were far greater than any actual problems (although there are still those who remain opposed to the changes). For years to come, the kindergarten classes remained dominated by teachers with a nursery school background. Now, a generation further, most older teachers and certainly the new younger teachers are qualified to teach in all classes of the school. In the last two decades, quality has visibly improved: in 2005, 2.4% of children repeat group 3 or stay in group 2 for an extra year, compared to 11% repeating first grade (now group 3) in 1985; and international studies on reading have seen the Netherlands jump from 21st to 2nd place in that time. Countering the budget cuts of the 1980's, government spending – when corrected for inflation – now shows an average per child investment having grown from 3000 Euro to 3900 Euro.

It should be noted, however, that concerns about children being pressured, for example, to read earlier, were not entirely unfounded. Compared to systems in other countries with broader developmental goals, the current Dutch kindergarten system tends to place greater emphasis on cognitive development (OECD, 2006b). Although not the national standard, this tendency is illustrated through the newspaper photo in Figure 1, which shows kindergarteners from one of 26 schools in the Dutch city of Enschede, participating in a pilot program that begins reading education when four-year-olds start school.

The current primary school

Even though Dutch primary education is mandatory from age five, 98% of children begin school at age four (Schreuder, Hoex, and van der Pijl, 2005). All children, also those with behavioral or learning problems, are accepted into the regular primary schools. For children with highly specific needs, such as those with serious mental or physical handicaps, there are separate, special schools.

In the Netherlands, there are some seven thousand primary schools funded with tax money. Aside from a small number of private schools, which are not financed by the government, there are three main types of publicly-funded schools in the Netherlands: public-authority schools, denominational schools and alternative schools. Public-authority schools are mostly run by a school board, a foundation or by a legal person appointed by the city council. Open to all children and not shaped on the basis of a denomination or philosophy of life, these schools educate about one third of all children. Denominational and alternative schools are run as an association, of which parents can become members, or as a foundation. About two thirds of all children go to denominational or alternative schools. Most of the denominational schools are Roman Catholic or Protestant, although



Figure 1: Kindergarten children working with their wordboxes
(Reprinted with permission from: *De Twentsche Courant Tubantia*, 25-4-2007)

there are also Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and humanistic schools. Alternative schools organize their education according to certain pedagogical principles, such as Montessori, Jenaplan, Dalton and Freinet.

Special provisions are available for all four-six year old children of parents with low educational background. Through the 60 million Euro in lump-sum financing they receive from the national government, schools are responsible for providing extra measures to needy children. Recent policy measures have been taken to increase the percentage of the target population being reached (currently 69%).

Dutch pre-schools today

Research has shown that children who participate in high quality programs reap short and long term benefits, (Barnett, 1995; van Kampen, Kloprogge, Rutten, and Schonewille, 2005; Leseman, Otter, Blok and Deckers, 1998), and cost-benefit studies also demonstrate that the investment is economically sound (Cleveland and Krashinski, 2003); both of these results are highest among very disadvantaged children. The Dutch preschool system targets disadvantaged children, with central aims of preventing and mitigating educational deficiencies. For example, many two and three year old children are lagging behind in language development because they speak poor Dutch, and/or receive little (Dutch) stimulation at home. Preschool programs therefore often emphasize language development. Pre-school programs target two and three year old children from parents of low educational background; 45% of this target group currently reached. Dutch research

has shown that programs with a developmental orientation can enhance language and cognitive abilities of children in the target group, and that the impact concerns *foundational* cognitive abilities as well as domain-specific school readiness skills (van Tuijl and Leseman, 2007).

From a policy perspective, early childhood education is a relatively new area of attention in the Netherlands as the first formal rulings and subsidies date from 2000, with frequent changes since then. Local authorities have been charged with the responsibility for implementing and running pre-school programs with the 110 million Euro they receive per year from the national government, as well as the income from parent contributions (subsidized and non-subsidized program structures are in place). It is noteworthy that no formal qualification or certification is required for working with young children in the Netherlands. In fact, current efforts to develop degree programs for early childhood workers are considered ground-breaking. Most preschool staff have a broad background in social work, with limited (if any) explicit concentration on early childhood; there are also many parent-volunteers with no formal qualifications in a related field.

Pre-school in the Netherlands is separated from day care. The pre-schools of today evolved from volunteer-run neighborhood playgroups that began to be established in the 1960's and 1970's to socialize and stimulate children; whereas the main rationale behind day care centers has been to allow parents (mothers) to work. While most day care providers nationwide now have pedagogical policies in place, few implement clearly defined curricular programs. In fact, the mere title of year's national symposium on «the sense and nonsense of pedagogy in daycare» may forecast hurdles to be faced by the new government in realizing its intention to harmonize legislation for pre-school and day care provisions.

Curricula

Ready-made programs

Most Dutch pre-schools use ready-made curricular programs, selected by either the local government or the organization itself. Many programs are designed across the pre-school-kindergarten ranges, while some specifically target the two-three age range. Pre-school curricula vary in nature and content and have been developed by a wide variety of individuals and organizations. Some programs are more comprehensive (Kaleidoscoop, Pyramid), while others focus more on certain areas such as language development (Taallijn), or social-emotional development (Startblokken). In addition to center-based programs, there has also been a movement toward home-based programs (Kruipgroep; Bij de hand; Stap rond; Spel aan huis; Rugzak; Spel- en boekenplan; Samen rekenen; Samen taal; Instapje; Opstap; Jij bent belangrijk) or programs for special needs children (Portage Programma Nederland; Feuerstein methode; Kleine stapjes).

Research has shown that home-based programs are generally less effective than center-based programs, but still worthwhile. A recent international meta-study examining cognitive as well as social-emotional gains indicates that center-based or combination center/

home-based programs, are the most effective (Blok, Fukkink, Gebhardt, and Leseman, 2005). Evaluation research on the three most prevalent programs in the Netherlands show clear cognitive gains for children attending the Kaleidoscope (Dutch version of High Scope) and Pyramid programs (Schonewille, Kloprogge, and van der Leij, 2000; Veen, Roeleveld, and Leseman, 2000) and socio-emotional gains for children participating in Startblokken (Veen, Fukkink, and Roeleveld, 2006). Used by 64% of Dutch preschools, the Pyramid program is the most popular pre-school program in the Netherlands (Kloprogge, 2003). Pyramid, briefly described in Box 1, was developed by educationist dr. Jef J. van Kuyk and his team from the CITO institute for testing and assessment, in close collaboration with preschool and kindergarten teachers.

Ready-made program example: Pyramid

Designed for children from three to seven years old, the Pyramid program provides a safe play-learn environment in which children can take initiative in play and independent learning. While variations are available for children who require additional support, such as language development, the core program addresses the following developmental areas:

1. *Developing observation skills*: all senses – feeling, tasking, smelling seeing and hearing with the aid of illustrative material. Sensory development is seen as an important condition for further development
2. *Personality development*: abilities to cope, independence, self-control and perseverance
3. *Social-emotional development*: learning to deal with feelings such as happy, sad, angry, scared; social behavior as defensibility, cooperation and collaborative play
4. *Cognitive development and numeracy*: Ordening, sorting, classification, seriation, numbers, counting, comparing and simple operations.
5. *Language development and development of reading and writing*: communicating with other children is important, but also communicating with adults, working on vocabulary development, interactive reading aloud and pre-reading and writing
6. *Orientation to space and time and world exploration*: sense of space and time, learning spatial and temporal concepts and experiencing these aspects of the world through projects
7. *Motor development*: fine motor skills (drawing, writing, using markers, pencils, scissors) and gross motor skills (jumping, aiming, swimming, dancing)
8. *Artistic development*: visual development, working with clay, pain, paper, textiles and aspects such as color, shape, light and space; musical development including songs, tempo, rhythm, tone and volume

The play-learn environment sets the stage and the method offers structure. Challenging materials and activity corners ensure that children can take initiative, discover and explore in all the developmental areas. Pyramid is a project-based method; each project has a structure with activities, applications, ideas, games, songs and other options.

Box 1: Pyramid program characteristics

Standards and assessment

As previously mentioned, major restructuring of the Dutch education system was enacted in 1985, including the integration of kindergarten classes into the primary school. While global subject areas to be addressed were documented, it was not until 1993 that national core objectives for primary school were established. Staying apace with changing

needs in society these core objectives have gone through three generations of revision, the most recent being published in 2006 (Greven and Letschert, 2006). With the aim of contributing to individual as well as societal development, the 58 objectives in the framework help schools shape their own curricular decisions in the following areas: Dutch, English and Friesan languages; mathematics; personal and world orientation; artistic orientation and movement. To help teachers determine how their pupils will meet these objectives, several institutions have developed interim objectives and learning trajectories (e.g. the Freudenthal Institute for Science and Mathematics Education; the National Expertise Center for the Dutch Language and the National Expertise Center for Curriculum Development, often in collaboration). Relevant to this chapter are those created for emergent literacy (Verhoeven and Arnoutse, 1999) and emergent numeracy (Treffers, van den Heuvel-Panhuizen, and Buys, 1999; van den Heuvel-Panhuizen and Buys, 2004). While state-of-the-art comprehensive and well-illustrated publications, complete with video case examples, are available for working with the interim objectives, the state-of-practice is that the majority of primary schools are only beginning to seriously examine their use. The teaching and learning of young children remains predominantly shaped by the ready-made curricula described in the previous section, only a handful of which are clearly linked with the national (interim) goals. Similarly, learning is most often tested, assessed and monitored through the products of a few companies and publishers; few of which have (yet) been designed to align with the national (interim) goals.

Discussion

Largely informal infrastructure

The largely informal infrastructure for preschool education offers several opportunities, but also poses threats to a healthy system. Locally organized, grass-roots initiatives are often characterized by their local sustainability. They also tend to be more able to reach into (impoverished) communities than initiatives organized on broader scales. A potentially positive function of the current – highly varied – system is the diversity and choice for the participants, as well as numerous opportunities to study different scenarios in practice. Finally, the informal infrastructure allows relationships to take their own course. For example, when it comes to exploring ways to shape preschool-primary school cooperation, the current system is conducive to trying out new ideas.

While the opportunities of the current system are worthy of consideration, the threats posed by its informal nature seem greater. If everyone is a little accountable for early childhood education, no one is completely accountable. Although sharing responsibility may be desirable, shared accountability is generally risky. Further, such a fragmented system can suffer from inefficiencies (Broekhof, 2006). The downside of the highly varied program quality, mentioned above, is that it often means unpredictable program quality. Finally, continuity is essential to easing transition to primary school; it would seem nearly impossible to improve this situation without some formal ties into the education system in place.

Professional development of early childhood educators

Between 2006–2010, 45 million Euro will be invested in early childhood to help increase participation of 90,000 to 130,000 children. By 2010, 70% of all preschool and primary school target group children, should be participating in early education programs, and bridging classes should be available for 36,000 children who start school with deficiencies (OCW, 2006). While clearly laudable, a crucial consideration with regard to these goals relates to staffing. The field already suffers from an inadequate level of professionalism (Broekhof, 2006) and staff shortages due to relatively low status, uncertain career paths, poorer working conditions and wages (OECD, 2006a). Without well-educated teachers, how are these goals to be met? The Dutch government has earmarked 18 million Euro for the inservice education of 5,000 preschool teachers (Versterk program), starting in 2007. As a clear commitment, it shows a promising start. But the need for serious consideration of upgrading and expanding preservice (preschool) teacher education, with commensurate salaries, has also been called for by experts from the field (Leseman, 2002; Meijnen, 2006; van Essen, 2007; van Kampen et al., 2005).

The role of research

The field of early childhood education research has a well-established history with its roots in the domains of psychology and family studies. It boasts a strong history of insights in learning behaviors and development. The field is respected in the scientific community, and rates of return on investment studies speak the language of policy-makers. At the same time, however, the field of early childhood education research is also impoverished in several areas. In addition to essential research on economic returns (Barnett, 2006) and program effectiveness (Blok et al., 2005; Leseman, 2002; Leseman, Rollenberg, and Rispen, 2001; Veen et al., 2006; Veen et al., 2000), there is also a growing need for research that highlights the implementation perspective of interventions in young children's classrooms (Fukink and Lont, 2007, in press; Peters, Droop, Biemond, and Verhoeven, 2006). With the exception of landmark research such as the OECD Starting Strong studies (Bennett, 2003; OECD, 2006b) research into the structures of early childhood educational systems is limited. Finally, the lack of scientific research dedicated to understanding and improving the professionalization of early childhood educators is remarkable. If large-scale changes in the schooling of young children are to be made, then efforts are warranted to strengthen the scientific basis for shaping such interventions.

Closing comments

The current structure of early childhood education is not internally consistent. While quality in preschools is a priority, sampling shows wide, often unpredictable, variety in quality. Similarly, education of teachers is highly varied, and their skill sets differ accordingly. In line with recent expert advice to the national government, (van Kampen et al., 2005), we argue that restructuring school entrance should address the need for high quality care for all children, not only the disadvantaged. Through ties with daycares and preschools, starting at age two, children of all backgrounds should be offered developmentally appropriate opportunities to learn and grow. Barnett's (2006) conservative calculations, based on reviews of evidence on program effects and economic returns data,

show that universal programs are found to yield higher net benefits than targeted programs (substantially higher for the most disadvantaged children); and that social and emotional gains (as opposed to cognitive gains) account for most of the economic return. It is important that new structures incorporate a balanced curriculum that stimulates essential school readiness skills and related attitudes such as: self-regulation; interest and ability to get along with others; responsibility; and creative problem solving. Further, it is essential that programs initiated in early years be continued into primary school (cf. Lese-man, Otter, Blok and Deckers, 1999).

Dutch kindergarten was once referred to as the «bewaarschool», implying that the school's main priority was to «keep» the children. Now, decades later, we are tempted to laugh at this notion, when we look at the strong pedagogical vision that shapes these classrooms. Unfortunately, however, the «keeping place» concept is alive and well in some preschools and many daycares. But there is hope. The current Dutch cabinet clearly intends to invest in improving the continuity between preschool, daycare and primary schooling, as evidenced by this year's unification of the responsibilities for daycare and education together under one ministry.

A recent survey conducted by the Dutch Institute for Applied Social Sciences and the Dutch Education Union examined primary school teacher views (n=1985) on connecting early childhood programs (both daycare and preschool) with primary school (Sikkes and van Kessel, 2007). The survey found that:

- Slightly more than half of the teachers responding strongly support the strengthening of connections between early childhood programs and primary school, with one third against the idea and a small group remaining neutral.
- The vast majority holds the view that transition to primary school will be facilitated, and slightly more than half cite this as an opportunity to shape continuous developmental and learning trajectories.
- Reminiscent of the concerns voiced in 1985 when kindergarten was integrated with the primary school, the fear of pressuring children and taking time away for playing is present among about half of the respondents, although more so prevalent among older teachers.

There is no question that the Netherlands shares the deep-rooted division between care and education (Bennett, 2003) that is common in many countries. However, results from the survey described above imply that educators are ready to explore ways of strengthening connections. Government policy changes and investments demonstrate a commitment to improving continuity between preschool, daycare and primary school education. As advocates of a system that offers developmentally appropriate opportunities to all children starting at age two, we find this an exciting and important time to consider restructuring school entrance, in the Netherlands and abroad.

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Elementary school in Flanders. Education for young children: steady progress or a hazardous learning process? Résumé and challenges for education policy.

— *Gunter De Vos*

Summary

Elementary education in Flanders, consisting of a pre-primary and a primary level, starts at two and a half years of age. For the course of nine years this should prove to be a continuous learning process for each pupil.

Nevertheless records state that a lot of children are already lagging behind in a very early stage of elementary education.

Amongst other things the transition from pre-primary level to primary school is getting a lot of attention. Apparently this seems to be one of the reasons for a lag in development. Data on learning disadvantage show that almost 4% of the children are trailing behind at the end of pre-primary school. By the end of the first year of primary school this percentage has gone up to 11.29. This lag in development is related to the language and socio-economic situation at home.

In Flanders this transition is taken very seriously. There is a constant search for possible tools to smooth out difficulties that could prevent children from moving up naturally from pre-primary school to the first year of primary level.

It is a fact that primary school focuses much more on intentional learning processes as opposed to random experiences in pre-primary school. In this respect the idea of school readiness prevails.

Readiness for school includes interactivity generated by factors within the child as well as within its environment.

Being ready for intentional learning processes depends upon:

- the development process equipping the child with sufficient knowledge, skills and attitudes enabling it to meet up to the expectations of the environment;
- the moment in school career in which intentional learning processes are introduced;
- the way in which this intentional learning process is organised.

In that sense assessing school readiness in young children moving up to primary school level is a perilous undertaking. An evaluation stating the strong and weak points of the young children and its environment would provide a more differentiated image.

It is essential to monitor a child's development and anticipate its needs by providing a challenging playing environment from a very early age.

Research shows that underprivileged and allochtonous children are subject to learning disadvantage, even at this early age. The mere fact of belonging to this underprivileged group of non-native speakers is a threat to their development. They already suffer from a serious learning disadvantage when they first enter pre-primary school. Early prevention in a group of underprivileged, non-native speaking children proves to have significant effects on their development throughout pre-primary school, and at the time when they

move up to primary school.

Therefore the measures of the current Minister of Education to encourage young children to attend school and stimulate their language skills should be appreciated. Future measures, such as the realization of a framework for learning support will enhance the appropriate monitoring for each child from a very early age.

Elementary school in Flanders: a steady progress

In Flanders compulsory education starts on September 1st of the year a child becomes six. Society expects children of that age to take their first «compulsory» steps in the field of education.

This compulsory entrance should not be interpreted too strictly since there is no actual compulsory school attendance in Belgium. Complying with certain conditions stated by the law parents can organise home tuition for their children. But this very seldom occurs.

Many young children are going to school a lot earlier, mostly around their third birthday. Almost the entire group of three year olds, that is 99%, is enrolled in a pre-primary school.

This doesn't mean they all attend school on a regular basis. Records state that from the population of two and a half and three year olds about 83.9% is present at school. Four year olds do actually attend pre-primary school, and their presence rises towards 99%. Contrary to the situation in other countries many children attend school in Flanders from a very early age.

The Department of Education organises education in elementary schools, with a pre-primary and a primary level. As a result the Flemish policy-makers can take measures to shape content and structure of care for young children.

The idea for an elementary school, more specifically education for children from two and a half to twelve years old, arose in the seventies. The purpose was to create an educational learning environment which enables pupils to experience a continuous learning process. The environment would be adjusted to the progress in the pupil's development. Consequently transforming separate pre-primary and primary schools into elementary schools was highly promoted later on.

Although theoretically it is still possible to organise separate pre-primary and primary schools, this has become very rare. In the school year 2005–2006 the number of autonomous pre-primary schools was 168, and there were 187 autonomous primary schools, as opposed to 1959 elementary schools containing both a pre-primary and primary level. Newly established schools now are compelled to organise both pre-primary and primary level.

Care and education for young children and children from six to twelve should no longer be two separate worlds in Flanders. In accordance most schools have developed a definite idea about the transition from young children to primary school.

In spite of this wide-spread vision a symbolic threshold still marks the transition from pre-primary to primary school. This becomes apparent in a mechanism of educational delay (pupils with one or more years delay).

A symbolic threshold between pre-primary and primary school

Parents do take the transition from pre-primary school to primary school very seriously. This becomes clear when you consider the number of articles giving advice to parents. A title such as «Moving up to primary school. Is your child ready for it?» is all too obvious. Questions from pre-primary teachers and parents – Is my child ready for primary school? – remain relevant, and people are craving for clear-cut answers.

Parents and school teams often put this question to Pupils Guidance Centres. These centres for pupils guidance are an external educational service providing support for schools and monitoring for pupils. Therefore it is one of their responsibilities to help schools, parents and pupils all through pre-primary level and later while moving up to primary school.

In the past these centres focused their assessment on young children who are on the threshold of primary school, in fact measuring their «school readiness». The question to be answered was: «When can a young child be considered ready to move up to the first year of primary school?»

When pre-primary teachers or parents are doubting whether a certain child is ready for this transition the Pupils Guidance Centre is involved. Their advice is legally provided and compulsory.

Before parents decide to postpone the transition to primary school for another year they must obtain expert advice in a Pupils Guidance Centre.

These centres will examine the school readiness of the child in order to procure a specific advice. The fact that this advice is compulsory strengthens the perceived importance of this transition and the existence of a symbolic threshold.

Educational delay

Educational delay is the manifestation of the way in which the transition from pre-primary to primary school represents a symbolic threshold. An average of 3.9% of the children show a delay in the course of pre-primary school.

In this delay social differences become quite distinct. Delay during pre-primary school more often occurs in young children springing from poorly qualified parents, particularly poorly qualified mothers, parents without employment or subject to a poor socio-professional status and, strikingly, also parents who are self-employed. Children with a (non-West-European or -US) foreign nationality and children speaking a (non-European) for-

eign language more often drop behind in the course of pre-primary school. Boys tend to develop a delay more often than girls. At the end of the first year of primary school 11.29% of the pupils have developed an educational delay. If we differentiate this figure according to nationality it appears that 30.5% of children from non-Belgian origin is lagging behind in the first year of primary school.

Apart from the many questions regarding the transition it is especially the social differences that become apparent in educational delay.

A project group of the Pupils Guidance Centres in Flanders (Lambert 2005) did explicit research on the transition from pre-primary to primary school. The findings of this project group have inspired this article.

The transition and school readiness in Flanders

A lot of attention is paid to the transition from pre-primary to primary school. In the Flemish educational system children start to learn how to read, write and calculate when they are about six years old. According to developmental psychology this is the right age. The process of learning how to read, write and calculate is systematically organised, and it has a distinct and well-defined educational intention. This intentional learning process is in sharp contrast with the pre-primary school type of learning, which is incidental.

The principle of pre-primary school is to create opportunities, to provide possibilities, to stimulate... This entails the fact that young children experience the learning process much less conscious and purposeful. Experiencing and learning new things is more or less a surprise, something which is also deeply embedded in the overall development of the child.

Around the age of six children tend to be able to learn something with an explicit educational intention in a purposeful situation and focusing on a given task. In the educational learning process the teacher can go along with the child's natural developing of a methodical and purposeful performance. In order to learn reading, writing and calculating, it is important to develop these skills gradually. The problem is that developing these competences is not as obvious for each and every pupil. And some children need more time to get started. Organising the learning process in a group demands even more skills. In a fairly well-organised environment the child needs to have the necessary social and cognitive skills in order to absorb an intentional learning process.

In pre-primary school these skills are not an issue, and sometimes it only becomes clear in primary school that some pupils haven't acquired them yet.

For some young children the transition from incidental to intentional learning remains a less visible, but nevertheless disturbing threshold in the process of learning how to read, write and calculate.

The recurrent hypothesis being: «If this child is not ready for our primary school system, then maybe it is just not ready for school?»

From school readiness to monitoring children in a challenging educational learning environment

In any case being capable of intentional learning involves interaction with a variety of factors within the child as well as within its environment.

It is the result of a developing process through which a child obtains sufficient knowledge, skills and attitudes to meet with the requirements of the intentional learning process, in this case learning how to read, write and calculate in a group.

School readiness only assesses knowledge and skills of the young child.

But not being ready for school also has to do with:

- the expectations of the environment;
- the moment in which the intentional learning process is started in the course of the school career;
- the way in which intentional learning is implemented .

In that sense assessment of school readiness in young children moving up to the first year of primary school is a hazardous undertaking. An evaluation stating the strong and weak points of a young child and its educational learning environment will provide a more elaborate picture.

An ambivalent yet confronting question becomes inevitable:

Is this pupil ready to meet the expectations of the educational learning environment?

Or

Is the educational learning environment ready to meet the expectations of the pupil?

Or to put it plain and simple: Is this child good enough for this school, or is this school good enough for this child?

In the past the Pupils Guidance Centre was believed to play an essential role in examining young children on the threshold of primary school.

It was the custom to run a collective test on groups of young children just before they went to primary school.

Nowadays this method of acting has been abandoned, for various reasons.

The collective test required a lot of effort while often there was no return in surplus value to the judgement of the pre-primary teacher. Moreover the collective test was not very reliable and the results were influenced by other factors such as stress, emotions and examining modes.

The predictive validity of these «school readiness tests» was very limited and often resulted in misapprehensions and unwarranted expectations of parents. These tests brought school readiness down to the cognitive aspect alone while the social and emotional aspects of learning for instance were not taken into account. Apart from that there were also serious doubts about the validity of the test in underprivileged and allochtonous children.

The effect of this examination was that in stead of facilitating the transition from pre-primary to primary school, it created the idea that this step was difficult to take, so in fact it made the symbolic threshold even higher.

Monitoring the development of young children from the beginning of their school career has only recently come into being. The purpose is to assess young children's position on a developmental curve and to stimulate them if necessary. The educational playing environment should be adjusted to the development pace and the nature of each child. Pre-primary teachers, in cooperation with a Pupils Guidance Centre, can now monitor all the children in various aspects.

«Het groeiboek» (the growth book) is a special needs monitoring system for young children, and as such an original tool specially designed for pre-primary school. Main purpose is that the pre-primary teacher monitors all the children in various aspects through observation, without however assigning any detailed quotas or judging to what degree certain specific development levels have or have not been reached. Only those children giving reason to concern will be under close observation resulting in a more detailed analysis.

Giving the young children proper care is the main point of interest, as well as providing supporting measures to ensure it, and giving support and the necessary confirmation to the pre-primary teacher with respect to her way of dealing with it. While the possibilities of the child are stressed in the first place, measures are also taken to enhance the competence of the professional people involved.

The process oriented special needs monitoring system for young children presents the pre-primary teacher with a tool of observation. The observation is focused, not so much on whether a child is lagging behind in its development, as on the fact that there is a certain development, progress in fact. Children with a poor sense of wellbeing and/or involvement are put under close observation. In cases of a poor sense of wellbeing further analysis is carried out in an attempt to get a picture of the possible underlying socio-emotional problems. Analysis of a child's commitment can uncover problems of a developmental nature. As a next step certain action items are pointed out for that particular child.

This special needs monitoring system, dating from 1994, has had a lot of impact in Flanders. Amongst other things it has influenced the concept of developmental objectives as issued by the government in 1998. These developmental objectives are the effect a pre-primary school should have on as many children as possible, according to the government. It is not something that should be reached in all children, but schools should try their best to work towards it. The word «development» refers to a growth process. Children can develop in their own way, at their own pace.

As a result pre-primary schools in Flanders are deliberately creating a challenging playing environment. Teaching is true to life and closely related to the life and interests of the children. Realistic context and lifelike situations are the starting point of educational activities. The offer of materials and activities is appropriate and well-balanced in such a way that it will generate self-reliance and stimulate the mental, physical and socio-emotional development of the child. The natural coherence created by this manner of working with topics and spheres of interest is generally accepted.

So it seems all too clear that stimulating children in their development towards «school readiness» (taking this symbolic threshold) is an assignment for the entire pre-primary school level. Thresholds are not taken at the end of pre-primary school. On the contrary, the threshold is smoothed and eliminated in the course of pre-primary school as a whole.

Most schools in Flanders have a definite opinion on how to eliminate this symbolic threshold. A vision that is reflected in the way in which the educational learning environment is organized. Transition for the children involved will undoubtedly be less abrupt.

A few examples to illustrate:

- exchange projects between pre-primary and primary school;
- collaborating on various topics;
- by offering appealing corner activities or work-and-play opportunities young children can engage in autonomous pursuit just like the pupils in primary school;
- by presenting the activities on a task board the teacher can organise assignments the children can carry out either on their own or in group;
- playing activities and moments of intentional learning are alternated for a longer period in the course of primary school;
- children are allowed to go at their own pace;
- facilities are arranged in such a way, for instance using connecting or collective spaces for recreation, that pre-primary and primary schools are more in tune with one another.

Unfortunately these educational agreements between pre-primary and primary levels to continue the same type of learning, by for instance allowing the children to go at their own pace, by mixing playing and learning during a longer period, by organising corner activities in the class room, the use of a task board ... are still lacking in too many schools. This means that in a number of elementary schools throughout Flanders certain measures can still be taken to ensure a smooth transition from pre-primary to primary school.

Social differences and educational delay

Patrick Meurs did research on underprivileged and allochtonous children and charted their developmental progress.

The researcher monitored the development of a group of children (Meurs 2006, 2007) from birth until the moment of entering pre-primary school. The research involved 408 children originating from diverse ethnic minorities and socio-economical background. The research was linked to a prevention project.

The children were subdivided into four groups. Belonging to an under- or privileged background, allochtonous or autochtonous. The label underprivileged was defined according to a number of indicators: a family income of maximum 900 euros a month, bad housing, poor schooling of the parents, living in a neighbourhood which is positively identified as «high-risk». Allochtonous is taken to mean children whose parents or grandparents have

migrated to Belgium from another country. The children were monitored from birth until the age of three. The research methods made it possible to report elaborately on the mental (cognitive and language) as well as the socio-emotional and motorial development for the entire period.

At 18 months the allochtonous privileged children reach an average mental development score that autochtonous privileged children had reached one and a half month earlier. The underprivileged autochtonous children are generally lagging two months behind, while underprivileged allochtonous children have an average disadvantage of four to five months.

After a period of 36 months the differences in developmental age between the groups are significant, more specifically a disadvantage of three months for the privileged allochtonous children, five months for the underprivileged autochtonous children and seven months for the underprivileged allochtonous children.

Regarding motorial development the differences when entering school are somewhat alternated: both privileged groups score significantly better than both underprivileged groups.

As to the socio-emotional development both privileged groups get the better scores, while underprivileged allochtonous children have an average disadvantage of two months, and underprivileged autochtonous children show a lag in development of four to five months. In this case the disadvantage is slightly smaller than the mental disadvantage (cognitive and language development) but still significant.

Survey: Comparison of the development at 18/36 months or at a later time.	Privileged autochtonous children	Privileged allochtonous children	Underprivileged autochtonous children	Underprivileged allochtonous children
Mental development	18 months	+ 1.5 months	+ 2 months	+ 4/5 months
Mental development	36 months	+ 3 months	+ 5 months	+ 7 months
Motorial development	36 months	36 months	+ 5/6 months	+ 5/6 months
Socio-emotional development	36 months	36 months	+ 4/5 months	+ 2 months

This research shows the large vulnerability of the mental (cognitive and language) development in allochtonous children in the first years of their life.

This disadvantage in language and cognitive skills can be due to different causes. Amongst other things there is the multi-lingual situation, the uncertainty of the parents about their own use of language, the uncertainty about their social situation...

Allochtonous children growing up in poverty are stricken by an additional problem. In that case not only language and cognitive skills, but the entire development is vulnerable, meaning also the motorial and the socio-emotional development.

If the effect of an underprivileged background is examined in combination with the child's belonging to an ethnic minority, the researcher concludes that ethnic offspring has a smaller negative impact on development than poverty.

So poverty clearly has the larger impact if you compare it with ethnicity. In that sense fighting poverty becomes a priority. For both allochthonous and autochthonous children alike it will amount to a serious measure of protection.

On the other hand the impact of ethnicity should not be underestimated. Children do not tend to outgrow language and cognitive problems appearing very early in their life. The motivation of allochthonous parents to stimulate their children to perform well at school, as well as the children's own eagerness to learn might be threatened by this vulnerable language and cognitive situation. There's always the danger of a downward spiral.

Children with an underprivileged background enter school with a disadvantage. Allochthonous children often lack an adequate language environment or a bridge between school and home.

Data on social differences show that the symbolic threshold appears to become higher when the moment of entering primary school draws near. Educational delay is the measurable effect of this threshold.

The importance of early prevention.

Patrick Meurs (Meurs 2007) developed a prevention programme: «The First Steps». This programme is a prevention project with culture sensitive development coaching, educational support and family empowerment. Every week 56 parents and children with an underprivileged background (allochthonous and autochthonous) meet for group discussions on issues such as education, parenthood, child development, the cohesion within the extended and nuclear family and social participation. The prevention project started when the children were about 8 months old.

To measure the effect the prevention group and a control group (78 children) were monitored from the time before they started the programme (4 months) until 3 years after ending it, when the children were six and entered primary school.

After three years of prevention the number of high-risk children has clearly diminished. All the time these children were in the programme (from 0 to 3 years) some still showed hazardous development but without any serious disadvantage. In the following period (from 4 to 6 years) there is a renewed rise in high-risk profile, although not to the level of the children who were not involved in the programme.

Other significant effects are: an increase of the children's attendance at pre-primary school, a decrease of children diagnosed as not ready for the transition from pre-primary to primary level, a decrease in problems of social isolation and deficient language in pre-primary school.

Researcher Patrick Meurs recently started a secondary programme: «The Second Steps», for underprivileged parents wanting to continue the group sessions on education on a monthly basis, while their child is already attending pre-primary school.

Pre-primary teachers, equipped with the necessary tools, are capable of pointing out, in a very early stage, the fields that might cause trouble for certain children. It is clear that the research as well as the prevention project further stresses the importance of early interventions. Unfortunately, the request for support of allochtonous and underprivileged children is only made after the incidence of certain problems or when it is time to pass the threshold of primary school

Monitoring the development from the moment children enter pre-primary school, and in particular children coming from high-risk groups is something the people in charge of educational policy should take into account.

Challenges for the current educational policy:

Current educational policy is quite aware of the important role of pre-primary schools as to creating equal possibilities for underprivileged and allochtonous children. There is a definite awareness of the fact that children attending pre-primary school have a considerable advantage when moving up to the first year of primary school. Various initiatives have been taken to stimulate parents to send their children to pre-primary school. The Minister of Education is even considering compulsory enrolment from the age of five. At the same time a new structure is being installed to ensure special care for children with specific educational needs. This framework for learning support wants to provide a better survey of the existing tools of care for mainstream schools as well as special schools, and it will try to make them all fit closer together by putting them in one frame of reference.

The participation of pre-schoolers

Using the device «more young children in smaller classes» the Minister of Education has prepared a plan of action for a greater educational participation of young children. The intention is to stimulate parents who would normally enrol their children at the age of 4 or 5 to send them to pre-primary school at an earlier age.

Only it wouldn't make any sense to send children to pre-primary school if they don't get sufficient care.

So educational policy-makers are willing to invest extra money in so-called school entry groups. These are small classes introducing children who come to school for the very first time. School entry groups start after each holiday, which comes down to six times a year, without counting the beginning of the school year in September. Each time it will be a new class, depending on the number of new enrolments. At the moment these school entry groups can only be organised if there is a considerable number of new enrolments.

That's why children often end up in large classes where there is no extra time for newcomers. The Minister of Education will raise the budget for these school entry groups so from the school year 2007–2008 onwards it will be easier to split up these classes.

In schools with a significant group of underprivileged children (25% GOK-pupils¹) supporting measures apply to help teachers in their attempt to teach Dutch to non-native speaking children.

Moreover, at the level of school clusters, a group of collaborating elementary schools, necessary support will be provided to take on extra staff. This staff member should only be engaged in the organisation and implementation of a policy for stimulating the participation of pre-schoolers. He/she will cooperate with the local consultative body, the municipality and welfare to set up an active search for children who are not showing up for school.

The Minister also has set up a plan, to be implemented on September 1st of 2008, to provide an allowance to children coming from a family with a small income. Obtaining this allowance will depend upon the regular attendance of the child.

Compulsory enrolment from the age of 5

The request to lower the compulsory school age is emerging from time to time. Generally it is pointed out that this measure will result in extra opportunities for children who otherwise don't participate in the education system. The Minister of Education is considering this measure.

Statistics show that 99% of the pre-schoolers are already enrolled at the age of three, and from the age of four 99% of these children are actually attending school. Lowering compulsory school age from six to five is an isolated measure that will not bring about significant changes in the actual situation.

Educational care surroundings: a continuity of care between mainstream schools and special schools

In future Flemish schools will experience a reform of education for children with special needs. The principle of the reform is that, aiming at inclusion, education will have as its starting point the adaptation of the educational learning environment to the specific educational needs of the pupils. These can be adaptations to the existing tools of care, the pedagogical didactical approach and the educational objectives. The more a certain pupil needs care, the more the educational learning environment will have to be adapted. This continuity goes from offering care within the mainstream educational setting to meeting

¹ GOK pupil (Dutch abbreviation for children with less chances) according to the following indicators: the family is living on a replacement income; growing up in a substitute family; belonging to an itinerant population; mother without a diploma of secondary education; in combination with any other indicator: language spoken at home is not Dutch.

with specific needs in a separate educational setting.

At the moment only a small percentage of young children is directed towards a special educational setting. In fact it only concerns 1 821 young children as opposed to 233.000 in the mainstream pre-primary education system. In Flanders this percentage rises dramatically at primary school level. The amount of children receiving education in special schools increased in 15 years time from 4.2% to 6.4%.

In that sense focusing on a proper line of care in pre-primary school will be very rewarding, considering the organisation of special care at primary level. Moving up to primary school can't present a threshold for pupils with special needs. They were already monitored during pre-primary school level, so appropriate care can be given at the appropriate time. Therefore a continuous line of care from a very early age is the key objective.

Final conclusion

In this article we indicated the importance to focus on the development of young children from the moment they enter pre-primary school. The pre-primary teacher, being the first and foremost responsible person and expert in his/her classroom, carries the largest burden in this respect. Pre-primary schools with a large population of underprivileged and allochtonous children are faced with a hazardous task.

But an equal responsibility is in the hands of the policy-makers. The measures planned by the current Minister of Education are more than justified. Reducing the number of young children in school entry groups, children's first introduction in the education system, will hopefully result in a first experience of success for young children and parents alike. The extra attention for language development in pre-primary schools with a large population of GOK-pupils is also highly recommendable. Considering the findings of the prevention project the Minister wants to include the entire network surrounding the school in order to enhance the participation of young children in education.

Apart from creating a challenging playing and learning environment these measures can be a valuable contribution, including the fact that a lot more educational agreements will be made between pre-primary school and primary school regarding the continuity of educational methods and carefully monitoring the development of young children, the main objective being to eliminate the threshold towards primary level. In fact only one symbolic threshold should be taken by the children, namely on their very first school day.

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The Education of the Age Group of 4–8: the Transformation of the Early Phase of Education in Hungary

— Mária Köpataki and Mária Szabó

The Structure of the Hungarian Education System

Public education levels in Hungary

Public education in Hungary has three levels.¹

(i) *Pre-school education begins in kindergarten.* Kindertartens provide the institutional education for children aged 3–7 in a day care system, with opening times of 10–12 hours. Kindergarten education may start at the age of three but is compulsory from the age of five. Children over five years old must attend at least four hours of kindergarten activities from the first day of the school year. The provision of kindergarten services is the legal responsibility of local governments, but the provider of this public education service may be churches, foundations, economic organisations and private individuals in addition to local and national government organisations.²

In order to fulfill legal requirements those local governments that maintain kindertartens must register those children who are of kindergarten age, thus the ratio of children over five attending kindergarten exceeds 95%. Once a child reaches the level of maturity necessary to start school education, they become schoolable. At the earliest this occurs in the calendar year in which they reach the age of 6 by May 31 st. At the latest they must start in the calendar year in which they reach the age of eight. Children over the age of 7 may still attend kindergarten if so requested by their parents on two conditions: that the professional and rehabilitation committee recommends the necessity of kindergarten education, and that kindergarten staff also agree. Maturity for school is certified by the kindergarten, which may request professional help (for example that of a speech therapist, psychologist, or teacher of disabled children) in special cases.

In order to facilitate the smooth transition from kindergarten to school, an increasing number of professional workshops have been organised where kindergarten and general school teachers coordinate their practical and theoretical approaches.

(ii) *Grades 1–8 represent the primary level of training and education*, of which grades 1–2 are called introductory; grades 3–4 beginner; grades 5–6 preparatory, while grades 7–8 are development phases. The period called lower secondary level in several European countries corresponds to grades 5–8. The maintenance of general schools is the responsibility

¹ Day nursery is part of the health care system for infants and is supervised by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. It primarily offers day care for the professional treatment and education of infants between 20 weeks to 3 years of age raised in families. Occasionally, extra services are provided in addition to the basic level of attendance. Every child whose day care cannot be provided by their parents for any reason may be admitted to day nursery, but day nursery provisions are especially important in those cases where, due to social circumstances, education in day nurseries may better contribute to a child's healthy development.

² Act XXII of 1990.

of local governments, but as is the case with kindergartens, non-governmental schools may also operate.

In the case of general schools it is of utmost importance that every schoolable student in every community is provided with a place. Therefore, on the basis of legal regulations, general schools must admit every schoolable student whose home or current address lies within their catchment area. No entrance examination may be held for admission to general schools³. School education is compulsory up to the age of 18.

(iii) *Secondary* education programs are differentiated on the basis of whether they offer a vocational or general education, and whether they prepare students for a secondary school-leaving examination. This period of education starts in grade 9 and finishes by the end of grades 12/13 in secondary schools issuing school-leaving certificates. Due to changes in recent years enrollment in institutions of secondary education is also possible in grades 5 and 7 in addition to the typical grade 9. Vocational education may be entered at several stages: following the acquisition of general education after grade 10, or after graduating from a vocational secondary school issuing a school-leaving certificate. The number of students attending vocational secondary schools that issue secondary school-leaving certificates has increased significantly, while the number of students in vocational schools (not issuing secondary school-leaving certificates) has nearly halved in recent years. The number of students in higher grades (13–14) has increased by various extents depending on the profession.

Since the Public Education Act was passed in 1993 the education of *children with special education needs* has been based on the type of special need. Education can be provided either in special education institutions or in regular schools in the form of inclusive education. The Act also stipulates that students with special education needs may only be enrolled in institutions possessing the personnel and material requirements necessary for special education. Parents may take these factors into account when choosing between special education and inclusive institutions.

Challenges

- The Public Education Act allows enrollment to school after the age of six and due to the fact that parents often take advantage of this, more than half of the children aged six attend kindergarten. The handling of this situation poses a considerable professional challenge for both kindergarten and general school teachers.
- Despite the fact that the institutions' local education programs provide the form and content of cooperation between partner institutions (including kindergartens and schools) there are issues to deal with. The transition from kindergarten to school still represents a serious change for children (for example due to the move from free play to more controlled activities and the differences in daily routines and environment). At the same time the duration of the transition process from kindergarten to school for children is increasing.

³ Paragraph 66 of Act LXXIX on Public Education

- The factors that hinder the acceptance of children/students with special education needs, and thus the elimination of unequal opportunities are: education organisation methods that do not take into account the differing backgrounds of students, rigid evaluation systems and a traditional organisational framework.

The Hungarian Public Education Administration System

Description

Hungarian public education administration is operated as an integral part of the Hungarian public administration system.⁴ It has been most dominantly characterised in the last fifteen years by strong local autonomy as a result of a high degree of decentralization, and the responsibility for leadership and decision-making is shared by different actors. Sharing of responsibility exists both horizontally as well as vertically. Horizontal sharing of responsibility is represented by the cooperation of ministries in charge of the control of Hungarian public education. Besides the Ministry of Culture and Education, the roles of the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, and of the Ministry of Finance are also important. The education of children under 3 is the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. Concurrent to EU-membership and the receipt of EU-subsidies, national inter-sector connections have started to institutionalise, but the process has still not ended: additional large-scale changes may be expected in the future. Vertically the administration and responsibility are shared on four levels and at each level the following organisations exist: (1) political – conciliatory – consultative, (2) administrative and (3) professional. The levels of administration are: national, territorial, local and institutional. Territorial level actually includes three entities: the counties, which have traditionally characterised Hungarian public administration, regions exceeding the size of counties, and small regions of less than county size. The latter two have emerged with EU-accession and are gaining increasing importance. Different administrative levels contain different administrative responsibilities and institutional systems.

Administration in the *national* sector is primarily effected in a comprehensive and framework-like manner. The past 15 years saw the reinforcement of the national level in its forms and means. The regulatory power of the central government has especially grown stronger with the administration of activities related to the European Union. Government-level decisions also affect inter-sector relationships. The most significant accomplishment of the past period is the development and implementation of the National Development Plan (NDP). The development of plans spanning several budget periods, containing new elements, international conciliation, and the creation and management of projects aimed at implementation emerged as new tasks. The development of the National Strategic Reference Framework for the period 2007–2013 began in 2006, which was approved by Parliament at the end of the year as the New Hungary Development Plan.

Regional and local public education administration is effected within the framework of

⁴ Report on Hungarian public education 2006. http://www.oki.hu/oldal.php?tipus=cikk&kod=jelentes2006-12_iranyitas

the local governmental system. The institutional system of complex development policy integrated into regional development has been under construction at *regional* level since the end of the 1990's. Only devolved institutions (fulfilling the regional representation of national responsibilities) operate at this level of administration, no decentralized organization with independent decision-making rights exists. *County* governments have fulfilled regional public education administration responsibilities (regional planning and coordination) since 1996. Responsibilities on the administration level of *small regions* emerged in the beginning of the new millennium, and these are expected to play an increased role in regional administration through the associations that have emerged after 2004. The organisation system of *local* administration, due to the large number of local governments the Hungarian communal structure, and their heterogeneous composition with respect to their size and social-economic situation, is fragmented and uneven. The range of local responsibilities is very extensive, and its contents do not depend on the size, population and/or other social-economic characteristics of the relevant community. In order to assure quality education and the cost-effective operation of the institutional network, the supervisory responsibilities of organisations in the maintenance of their institutions have expanded. With participation in competitions related to the implementation of the National Development Plan, opportunities have emerged for the large-scale renovation of institutional infrastructure on the one hand and, on the other, for the participation in programs promoting equal opportunities and competence-based education.

Educational institutions enjoy a high degree of professional autonomy and extensive administration rights. The head of institution is responsible for the professional and legal operation of the institution, its economical management, its representation, and also exercises employer rights. Teaching staff play an important role in the development of institutional strategy and in making decisions affecting daily operation⁵.

As a result of the system of shared responsibilities, public education offers a wide range of opportunities for both the civil sector and the economy. However, this is not the dominant characteristic of the system.

Content regulation in public education

Every institution is operated on the basis of an educational-pedagogical program developed by the teaching staff and approved by the financing organisation. Its common content is defined in the National Core Curriculum for Kindergarten Education and the National Core Curriculum, which are published as legal regulations. National-level content regulatory documents are also fundamental documents in the education of children with special education needs, but institutions developing training programs for their education also have to take into account the guidelines on the education of children with special education needs⁶. These guidelines define the legal basis for the right to special treatment, and the principles and content of habilitation and rehabilitation treatment. The core curriculum characteristics of the National Core Curriculum have been reinforced by its amendment in 2003, which ensures professional independence and support for in-

⁵ Act LXXIX of 1993 on Public Education

⁶ Ministry of Education Decree 2/2005 (III.1.)

novative initiatives by institutions and teachers. There has been increased emphasis on meeting requirements for the acquisition of intelligent, instrument-based and applicable knowledge for which the primary drivers were cross-curriculum competencies.⁷

When kindergartens and schools develop their local curricula, education and training programs they must take into account not only the national regulators but also several additional factors. These factors are local education and training objectives, local opportunities and the expectation of parents as well as the characteristics of their students.

The amendment of the Public Education Act⁸ aims to ensure equal opportunities for students and children by reinforcing the prohibition of discrimination, specifying its cases and regulating its consequences. In order to develop students' reading comprehension competence the development and implementation of «non-subject-related education» in 25–40% of the training time in grades 5–6 is required⁹. Evaluation in report form and formative assessment of students is required in grades 1–3 to ensure a suitable personal developmental pace.¹⁰

Challenges

- At a regional level neither institution system nor mechanisms have developed that would meet the requirements of the Union's subsidiary policy.
- The review and amendment of all strategic documents in institutions as a result of the continuous transformation of legal requirements creates additional burden for teaching staff. In addition to the work required to prepare applications to participate in programs of the National Development Plan, the successful institutions have to participate in the implementation of central programs. As a result little energy remains for individual development, the reliable acquisition of basic skills, laying the foundation of key competencies, and implementing inclusion in daily pedagogic practices.

Education Policy Priorities with Reference to the Group of 4–8

Description

This chapter introduces primarily those medium- and long-term objectives of the three levers of professional administration at national level (aims, pressure, support) that are especially related to the education of the 4–8 year age group.

The medium-term *public education development strategy* of the Ministry of Education was finalized in 2003. This strategy was designed to integrate into the national development plan, and its purpose was to facilitate the receipt of European Union subsidies. The long-term strategy for 2005–2015 defines the most important priorities, directions of development, and related prospects for the future that would form a basis for the definition of the strategic objectives and system of means. Its governing concept is how public education may contribute to competitiveness and social cohesion, and puts school development in

⁷ Vass, Vilmos: A nemzeti alaptanterv felülvizsgálata. ÚPSZ, 2003/6.

⁸ Paragraph 4

⁹ Paragraph 8

¹⁰ Paragraph 7o

the center of the implementation process. The acquisition of competitive knowledge and the mitigation of unequal opportunities are defined as the most important development objectives.

The most important document outlining the use of Union subsidies is the *New Hungary Development Plan*, which sets two primary objectives for mitigating the greatest problems of the country: the expansion of employment and the establishment of the conditions for continuous economic growth. The achievement of objectives is elaborated in six major areas, including that of social renewal dealing with the development of the quality of human resources. The provision of the access to quality education for all appears within this topic, with related content developments. The harmonization of education with the needs of society and economy as well as the development of economic and entrepreneurial skills is important. Primary objectives in the implementation of the plan are support for the introduction and application of complex pedagogic development programs, the establishment of an assessment and evaluation system, the reform of teacher training and in-service training, the introduction of cost-effective organisational forms, the facilitation of regional cooperation, and support for the education of disadvantaged students.

A major objective in the provision of quality knowledge for all is the development of basic skills and labour market competencies (mainly knowledge of foreign languages, digital literacy, mathematical and natural sciences, life skills necessary and entrepreneurial skills). New, innovative forms of training (for example open-air kindergartens/schools, green kindergartens/schools in nature, experiential learning) are supported during their implementation. Major objectives include the consistent continuation of content reforms started in the First National Development Plan, the continuation of competence-based education, new learning forms and the promotion of digital literacy, the introduction of a unified assessment, evaluation and quality assurance system of student and teacher performances, the connection of formal, non-formal and informal systems, and the modernisation of teacher training and in-service training.

In order to improve the cost-effectiveness of primary and secondary education and to mitigate regional differences taking into account social and economic changes, the systematic and administrative reform of the education system is unavoidable. Therefore particular attention is paid to the introduction of novel organisational solutions supporting the rationalization and integration of the institutional system, and the fulfillment of special needs emerging as a result of the decrease in the number of schoolable children. In order to improve the success of students with special education needs and multiply-disadvantaged – especially Roma – children, and to eliminate educational segregation and discrimination, the development and introduction of complex pedagogical development programs for the entire public education system are necessary from pre-school to medium-level education. Special attention must be paid to the mitigation of segregation in regions with a high ratio of Roma population and to the support of gifted children. The creation of conditions that facilitate the integrated education of children/students with special education needs also requires a high level of attention.

Challenges

- While the development of human capital plays a strategic role in the implementation of

- medium- and long-term objectives of the country, teachers controlling the education of the 4–8 year age group who play a key role in the process are not adequately respected members of society.
- Another factor reinforcing the status problem of kindergarten and general school teachers is that, in spite of the Bologna process, they receive a lower level of education than their colleagues teaching in higher grades. (The level of education of staff working with children under 3 is even lower; they only need a secondary school-leaving certificate and professional training in order to be qualified for their job).
 - Tenders for the implementation of programs designed to achieve long-term objectives have a responsibility to build a bridge between the objectives and the practices that must be created.

The Means Supporting Implementation

Description

This chapter describes the implementation of education policy priorities at *various levels* from the aspect of *pressure* and *support*.

Means of *pressure* at *national level* include *legal regulations* requiring e.g. compulsory kindergarten education from the age of 5, the implementation of the transition from kindergarten to school, the guarantees of integrated training and education, the introduction of national assessments, or the application of assessment in report form in grades 1–3 at midterm and at the end of the school year. A requirement aimed at the qualitative improvement of public education is that schools shall plan the development they intend to implement on the basis of the results of national competence assessments.

Means of *support* at *national level* include e.g. a national *assessment* contributing to the promotion of diagnosis-based development, which was completed with all first-graders in 2000. The assessment tool¹¹ is received by every school free of charge and may be used for the assessment and diagnosis of basic student skills. Following assessment, work to bring a student to the level of others may start with the use of a development program and schedule adjusted to the level of skills and knowledge of the individual student.

Another element of support at national level is a *comprehensive development program* supporting the achievement of the objectives of the National Development Plan¹². This has resulted in the development of program packages for kindergartens and general schools, the introduction of which may put skills development in the focal point of Hungarian public education. The program packages suitable for the introduction of practical knowledge applicable in the long term (such as: training programs, teaching materials and assessment means) have been developed in seven fields of competence: reading comprehension and text composition, mathematics, foreign languages, social-lifestyle and environment, career development, information-communication technology and kindergarten educa-

¹¹ Nagy, József (ed. 2002.): Az alapkészségek fejlődése 4-8 éves életkorban. OKÉV, KÁOKSZI

¹² Central program schedules of actions 3.1 and 2.1 of the Human Resources Development Operative Program of the National Development Plan

tion. Every package includes recommendations for the support of inclusive education of students/children with special education needs. Implementation is supported by the system of in-service training for teachers.

The implementation of education policy priorities is supported by the *development programs*, related pilot programs and conclusions drawn in the *workshops* of the National Institute for Public Education (OKI).

The most significant of these development programs is the *MAG-program* developed by a Hungarian–Dutch collaboration¹³ with the objective of making general schools a place of successful learning for every student, with special attention paid to disadvantaged students in danger of social exclusion. The leading idea of this preventive model is that school work will only become successful for every student if, instead of trying to adapt the students to school expectations, the school itself and the organization of learning should be adapted to students' needs. On the basis of international experience in effective school development, implementation requires a change in attitude, thinking and everyday routine of concerned participants (teachers, school heads, maintainers). Therefore, professional support of the development program implemented with the participation of thirteen schools was achieved by a series of training programs built on the experiences of class teachers, school heads and the representatives of local education administration. The process was supported with other forms of horizontal learning, such as annual work conferences, newsletters and a website. On the basis of the experiences gained during the program, and for the purpose of national promotion, the accreditation process of a training program for teachers and institution managers is under way.

The *Child Information Technology Workshop*¹⁴ has several years of experience. Its significance was reinforced following the amendment of the National Core Curriculum in 2003, which required development tasks for grades 1–4 in the field of information technology (primarily in connection with the use of information technology tools). Members of the workshop include practicing teachers who assist the successful implementation of teaching information technology and the development of digital literacy for children. These teachers have collectively developed a set of methodology ideas such as games and activity plans. These resources are accessible on the website of the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development – formerly National Institute for Public Education (www.oki.hu).

The *Integration Methodology Workshop*¹⁵ ensures the operation of a network that supports integrated education of students with special education needs. Assistance is offered with the development and operation of contacts, provision and exchange of information, while the workshop also assists research and development, drives and evaluates professional work and disseminates results. The collection of training event plans and training plans provides assistance for the implementation of integrated education of children/students with special education needs.

¹³ Bognár, Mária (2005.): Félúton a MAG program. Néhány tanulság a pedagógiai fejlesztések számára. ÚPSZ 7-8.

¹⁴ K_rösné Mikis, M.: Gyermekinformatika. <http://www.oki.hu/oldal.php?tipus=kiadvany&kod=gyermekuj>

¹⁵ K_patakiné Mészáros, Mária & Singer, Péter: Módszertani kaleidoszkóp – tanári kézikönyv befogadó pedagógusoknak (OKI—IHK, 2005)

Teachers play a key role in the implementation of education policy objectives. Continuous training programs are of significant importance in their empathic and methodological preparation. The present system of in-service training programs for teachers was initiated by a 1997 Government Decree¹⁶. It basically requires teachers to attend 120 hours of accredited in-service training in the interest of their personal professional development and the successful implementation of their institution objectives. The system operates on a «market» basis: supply is represented by accredited training programs of teacher training institutions, various professional service providers and profit-oriented companies, of which teachers may select at will on the basis of the in-service training plan and the requirements of the institution. Participation in in-service training is supported by the national budget: institutions receive budget subsidy earmarked for in-service teacher training, in proportion to the number of teachers and according to the ratio defined in the annual budget.¹⁷ Research findings¹⁸ show that, although only about 30% of the current number of teachers in Hungary actually participate in in-service training, those teaching the 4–8 year age group are represented the most. The most popular training programs in the past three years have been the ones on personal development and the training of children with special education needs. The most highly attended methodology training programs were given on the application of cooperative techniques, and many teachers have attended some sort of information technology training. In-service training programs supporting the implementation of education policy priorities will appear in the supply soon.

Challenges

One of the greatest challenges in connection with the success of the overall education system is the problem of giving the human factor a competitive edge. The transformation of classroom processes is the responsibility of teachers, which has an effect on the entire organization. The support of institution managers is essential for implementation. Consequently, some fundamental questions need to be answered:

- How the results of national and international development programs can be disseminated to a large number of teachers in a way that promotes classroom application.
- How the attitude of teachers, the sharing of knowledge within institutions and daily practices may be changed as a result of in-service training programs.
- How innovations and development programs may be disseminated to less innovative and interested teachers and institutions.
- How to ensure the dissemination of various forms and methods enabling the continuous professional development of teachers such as mentoring, coaching, horizontal learning, reflection, and the implementation of processes that enable teachers to learn from each other.

¹⁶ Government Decree 277/1997. (XII.22.) on the in-service training and professional examination of teachers, and the allowances and benefits of participants in in-service training.

¹⁷ Polinszky, Márta Dr. (2003): A pedagógus-továbbképzési rendszer sajátosságai Magyarországon. www.sulinova.hu

¹⁸ Cseh, Györgyi (2006): A tanítóknak szóló pedagógus-továbbképzések szerepe a személyre szóló nevelés megvalósításában

The Daily Practice of the Educational Process

Description

The most important and basic means of achieving education objectives in *kindergarten* is free play, where children gain knowledge and experience in natural and simulated environments through spontaneous, imitating activities. Toys and work materials are placed on open shelves easily accessible by children, in a divided space adapted to their characteristics and providing the possibility for multiple activities and personal development, where children may choose between various activities.¹⁹ One of the strengths of Hungarian kindergartens is the implementation of a personal education process and the continuous follow-up of children's development. Following diagnostic assessments, personal development programs are drawn up by kindergarten teachers who decide on the selection of methods and means on the basis of local kindergarten education principles.²⁰

Following the game-based activities in kindergarten, studying becomes the central activity for children at *school*, which is regarded as serious work by teachers and the majority of parents alike. This situation makes the start of school more difficult. As an effect of external and internal innovations, the teaching practice and realisation of a study-centered approach are increasingly found in traditionally rigidly structured institutions.

As a result of reforms, developments, and the explicit demand for integration by parents, more and more institutions are developing the conditions for inclusive training and education. An increasing number of institutions, especially kindergartens, are willing to actually implement inclusive education.

Research on the practices of the *entrance phase and inclusive education* has been conducted by the National Institute for Public Education since 2003²¹. Examinations included:

(1) the analysis of the transition from kindergarten to school, the causes of early school failure, the assessment of the state of early skill development, foreign language teaching and digital literacy, and the examination of the attitude of teachers and institution managers with respect to the role played by the lower grades and the provision of personalized quality education. The research focused on school and classroom practices. One of the results revealed the fact that the failure to achieve sufficient results with traditional methods meant a significant motivation for innovation. Teachers of heterogeneous classes were more willing to apply differentiating pedagogical methods.

(2) Research (OKI, 2001–2003) results²² revealed that the best inclusive institutions showed clear commitment to institutional practices, the mindset of teachers regarding their role changed and teacher competence was improved. Emphasis in the teaching-learning process is placed on the personal development of each student in the class; taking into account their individual needs, work rhythm and abilities. The development of learning skills is more important than the absorption and recitation of knowledge. In such an environment, where teachers view their class as a community of individuals, the integration of children different from the others is easier, because school work is not prima-

¹⁹ Villányi (2004.): *Gyermekeink gondozása, nevelése*, OKI

²⁰ Paragraph 8 of Ministry of Culture and Education Decree 4/2006. II. 14.

²¹ Szabó, Mária (ed. 2006.): *A jövő előszobája.. Tanulmányok a közoktatás kezdőszakaszáról*. OKI

²² *Befogadó iskolák – elfogadó közösségek.. Kutatási kötet*. Ed.: Köpatakiné Mészáros, Mária. OKI, 2003.

rily directed at average performers. According to research findings, the most important characteristics that are demanded of a teacher who is willing to attempt inclusive education are an open attitude and an understanding of the individual characteristics of their students. The devotion of institution managers and teaching staff greatly influence the success of inclusion.²³

Good practices

When an example of good practice is discovered, its dissemination and usability are important considerations. The research focusing on the beginner phase placed great emphasis on the identification of best practice, the dissemination of relevant experiences and on horizontal learning. Most examples of best practice can already be found at schools. They are usually present in innovative institutions that have already participated in some kind of large-scale national or international development project, in-service training or program. In order to support the implementation of personal development institutions apply project weeks, thematic weeks, adaptive education, several flexible organisational procedures and the continuous tracking of student performances with a portfolio. In order to successfully integrate students with special education needs, pair-teaching and consulting models are applied.²⁴

A prominent trend in integrated education is that in addition to summative assessment, the role of diagnostic and formative assessments are increasing in importance. This trend has developed because assessments in report forms have become everyday practice as a result of legal requirements. Researches conducted by OKI²⁵ have examined how curricula, teaching materials, classroom processes and the results of individual student development and assessment may be connected. Good practice includes flexible and differentiated organisation of learning and distribution of curriculum that ensure the possibility for personal development according to personal characteristics, a differentiated assessment system, and cooperation with parents, social partners and other experts. The study of viewpoints regarding assessments may reveal the skepticism of teachers and the attitude of parents regarding assessment in report forms.²⁶

Challenges

- Instead of diagnosis-based development, professionals working in various phases of public education «point downwards» (for example lower grades blame kindergarten for not preparing students well enough for school). At the same time they want to meet the expectations of upward institutions (the most important objective is that children leaving the institution should be able to cope with requirements in the next phase of education). Without this, the professional transformation of education cannot happen.
- Developments resulting in institutional innovations but originating externally introduce models into institutional practice, but little attention is devoted to adaptation and

²³ Akadálypályán. Ed.: Köpatakiné Mészáros, Mária. Sulinova, 2007.

²⁴ http://www.oki.hu/oldal.php?tipus=kiadvany&kod=Kezdo_esetanulmanyok

²⁵ A befogadó intézmények értékelésének jó gyakorlatai. Országjelentés. Ed.: Köpatakiné Mészáros, Mária. OKI, 2006.

²⁶ (<http://magyartanarok.fw.hu>)

- support during implementation.
- The internal innovations and developments of institutions working as professional workshops stay within the institution and are not distributed in the system.
 - Little knowledge is at hand for the maintenance and dissemination of innovation and good practices.
 - The responsibility of institution managers in the implementation and maintenance of innovations is clear (expectation – support – pressure), but they have little energy left for the purposeful implementation of school development in addition to their administrative, economic and legal duties.
 - No mechanisms exist to enable cooperation between organisations and professions, which (among other effects) hinders horizontal learning and the implementation of inclusive education.

Summary

The teaching and education of the 4–8 year age group is conducted in an inherited, traditional system characterised by the institutions of kindergarten and school on the one hand and the segregated education of children with special education needs on the other. Although the transition from kindergarten to school results in a break in the development of children, the applied pedagogical procedures, training content and the spread of inclusive education provide the opportunity to implement personalised quality teaching (education).

Education policy applies all three elements – pressure, objectives and support – for the implementation of improvements. As a result the public education system and the 4–8 year age group will be able to meet expectations.

While maintaining institutional autonomy, ongoing reforms and developments lay particular emphasis on the definition of the means and programs supporting improvement, the renewal of teacher training and in-service training, and the reinforcement of professional and advisory services.

A Successful Start in Primary School – Still a Challenge for the Austrian Education System

— Elisabeth Stanzel-Tischler

Introduction

In Austria, primary school is the first educational provision outside the family which is compulsory for all children. Compulsory education starts on the first September following a child's sixth birthday.¹ Attendance at institutions of education or care before compulsory school start is voluntary. The school system is predominantly² regulated by the federal government, and is thus uniform throughout Austria. The kindergarten system, however, is within the jurisdiction of the provinces. Thus the provisions and objectives of pre-school childcare institutions, public services law, and the remuneration of persons working in this field, differ within the nine Austrian provinces. On the other hand, kindergarten teacher training, which takes place at the upper level of secondary education, is uniform in Austria.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Before starting in primary school, children can receive ECEC in day-care centres (crèches for children under the age of three, kindergartens for three to five year olds, and care institutions for mixed age groups), or – more seldom – with childminders and in playgroups. According to Statistik Austria (2006) in the care year 2005/06 all over Austria 92% of all five year olds and 90% of all four year olds were enrolled at childcare institutions. The younger the children, the more seldom they receive care outside their families: 66% of the three year olds attended a childcare centre. Over the past ten years the care quota in this age group has risen.³ The Austrian provinces show significant differences in their care quotas: In their final year before primary school enrolment, in Vienna only 83% of the children attended kindergartens, whereas in Vorarlberg the number amounted to 98%.

Around three quarters of all kindergartens are funded by the municipalities, the rest is financed by church organisations and private associations. Kindergartens are mostly open from Monday until Friday. About 80% of kindergartens are open the whole day, while some of them – chiefly in Tyrol and Vorarlberg – close during lunchtime. 55% of staff is trained kindergarten teachers, the remaining personnel are assistants, cleaning or house staff. 99% of staff is female (Statistik Austria, 2006).

¹ Cf. sections 1 to 8b of the Austrian Compulsory Education Act (Doralt, 2006)

² As for the structural organisation of compulsory schools (e.g. number of pupils in a class) the federal government sets the framework which is subsequently put into practice by the provinces.

³ Under three year olds: from 4.6% (1995) to 10.2% (2005); three to five year olds: from 70.6% (1995) to 82.7% (2005). (Statistik Austria, 2006)

Each Austrian province⁴ defines the upper and lower limit of the number of children in a kindergarten group, and the number and qualification requirements of staff. Most provinces limit the maximum group size to 25 children. Under certain circumstances it is permitted to exceed these upper limits. Groups which include children with special needs, e.g. due to disability, or which are located in bilingual regions, are smaller. Each group is supervised by at least one trained kindergarten teacher, who is supported by assistants. In general kindergartens in Upper Austria, e.g. in 2005/06, an average of 19 children formed a group; the member of staff-child-ratio was 1:7.8 (Amt der Oberösterreichischen Landesregierung, 2006).

In addition, children who present or are in danger of developing disabilities have the opportunity to be cared for and supported in their families or in kindergarten medically, psychologically, pedagogically or functional-therapeutically. These measures of early promotion can be provided as in-patient, ambulatory and mobile services. Early promotion is also within the competence of the individual province. An Austria-wide supply is not currently provided, although further development is in the planning stage.⁵

The paradigm shifts of pedagogical concepts in the Austrian kindergartens over the past 100 years has been compiled by Berger (2005): After a phase of enhanced cognitive promotion in the 1960's, kindergartens have oriented themselves until present day along the concept of developmental psychology which focuses on the promotion of the child's whole personality. The objectives and principles formulated by Niederle et al. (1975) can still be found in the Austrian childcare legislation: Niederle listed eleven areas of education (emotional education, social behaviour, sexual behaviour, values, religious and Christian education, creativity, promotion of thinking, linguistic training, training of motor skills, learning and performance behaviour, and dealing with the environment), and considered playing as the dominant form of learning. Also the situational approach, developed as a counter-concept to compensatory, deficit-oriented pre-school education, has found its way into the Austrian kindergartens: On the basis of their current life situation and their social experiences, this approach aims at the promotion of the children's self- and social competences and skills required to cope with their life situation.

Over the last years voices have emerged which plead for an expansion of the existing pedagogical concepts. Based on the results of the PISA-surveys (Haider and Reiter, 2001 and 2004) which have shown that in Austria the socioeconomic situation of their parents has a significant influence on the children's test performance, but which have also indicated that kindergarten attendance has compensatory effects (Breit, 2006), politicians (Bundeskanzleramt, 2007) and education experts have called for a targeted, high-quality cognitive promotion of children already in kindergarten. The so-called Future Commission (Zukunftskommission), which was launched by the Minister of Education in 2003

⁴ Cf. the respective provincial law for the setup and management of kindergartens at <http://ris.bka.gv.at/> [March 21, 2007]

⁵ Cf. <http://www.help.gv.at/Content.Node/122/Seite.1220200.html#Frueh> [February 12, 2007]

to assure and increase education quality in Austria, pointed out that «an individualised promotion of children in pre-school institutions at the earliest possible stage. (Eder et al., 2005, p. 52, translator's note: original in German) could counteract the consolidation of the socioeconomic status, and recommended education counseling for parents and language promotion for children already in pre-school education.

Austria's participation in the OECD-project Starting Strong II can be seen as further evidence of the increasing relevance of pre-school education and care. The Austrian Background Report (BMBWK, 2004b) and the Country Note for Austria (OECD, 2006) have provided fundamental empirical data and a critical evaluation of the field of pre-school education and care. The OECD review team has positively highlighted in its report that Austrian childcare institutions implement a broad and integrative concept of ECEC. They do not only strive for preparation for school but also for a holistic development of all children. The fact that this basic concept is well established in Austrian childcare institutions is related to the nationally standardised training of kindergarten teachers. The OECD review team further sees positively that ECEC is almost completely covered by public or non-profit institutions and parents can therefore afford it. However, the review team has also suggested improvement measures: The creation of national framework conditions for all ECEC areas through the harmonisation of the diverging provincial laws, the formulation of national education goals and educational framework conditions by means of a national education plan, the creation of synergies among the provinces and the introduction of quality initiatives⁶, monitoring of quantitative and qualitative development of the ECEC field on a federal level, shifting of the professional training of kindergarten teachers to university level, and the promotion of scientific research and more solid bases of information.

Primary School: Structure, Goals and Modalities of School Enrolment

The Austrian primary school⁷ comprises the levels of *Grundstufe I* (pre-school level, grades 1 and 2) and *Grundstufe II* (grades 3 and 4). Starting in autumn 2007, teachers will receive training via a three-year programme at Teacher Training Colleges (previously: Teacher Training Academies). The goal of the pre-school level of primary school is to foster children of compulsory school age who are not yet ready for school. From the first to the fourth grade all pupils should receive a common elementary education. The number of pupils in a pre-school class is between 10 and 20 children, in a primary school class of grade 1–4 between 10 and 30. For the school year 2007/08 plans have been made to limit the number of pupils in the first grade to 25 children. Integration of children with

⁶ In order to guarantee high-quality education, make it transparent and assessable, some kindergartens apply the so-called transactional approach, developed at the Charlotte Bühler Institute for Practise-Oriented Early Childhood Research (cf. <http://www.charlotte-buehler-institut.at/> [March 20, 2007]). Following this approach, education quality is seen as a network of structural and process-related aspects and aspects of pedagogical orientation (Hartmann et al., 2000)

⁷ Cf. sections 9 to 14a of the Austrian School Organisation Act (Doralt, 2006)

disabilities in primary school is possible and in some cases entails a reduction in the number of pupils in a class.

Children of compulsory school age who are ready for school enrol in the first grade. «Ready for school» means that a child is considered to be able to follow teaching in the first grade without being intellectually or physically over-challenged. Also children who are under compulsory school age, but will have their sixth birthday before March 1st of the subsequent calendar year, are to be admitted to the first grade of primary school upon request of their parents, as long as long they are ready for school and have the social competences required for school attendance.⁸ As for children with disabilities, it should be ascertained before school start whether the conditions for the allocation of special educational needs provisions are given. If a special educational need (SEN) is granted, parents can decide between integrative education at a primary school and education at a special school. Children who are of compulsory school age but not yet ready for school enrol in the pre-primary level, that is, the pre-school level of primary school.⁹ The decision of whether a child is ready for school is made by the headmaster of the respective school.

In the context of pilot projects on the transition from kindergarten to Grundstufe I carried out in the 1990's, it was a central issue to establish the legal and practical basis to enable all children not ready for school to attend the pre-primary level and to guarantee a selection-free access to primary school. According to estimates, before the school year 1999/2000, each year about 2000 children of compulsory school age did not enrol at school because there were too few pupils to start a pre-school class in their local community (Grogger and Wolf, 2004). Children not ready for school were either not admitted to school at all, or started in the first grade but were returned to their families or kindergarten after some weeks. Although they did not receive school education, this year counted as their first year of compulsory schooling.

At present, all children of school age are admitted to primary school. The education forms, however, may vary according to the child's situation. Pre-schoolers can receive education together with pupils of the 1st, or of the 1st and 2nd grade within one class. This form of education has different names¹⁰: «Schuleingangs-class», «multi-grade class», «family class». Another possibility is that these pupils attend a separate pre-school class where only children who are not ready for school are educated. Whether a child will attend a separate pre-school class or a Schuleingangs-class with pupils of mixed age groups depends on how many children are enrolled at his/her school and in which province the school is located. Due to geographical and sociographical circumstances, the provinces

⁸ Neither the Austrian School Statistics nor the Statistische Taschenbuch (Pocket Statistics) provide information on how many children take advantage of this option. According to H. Gumpolsberger from Statistics Austria, in the school year 2002/03, 2832 children were prematurely admitted to primary school, i.e. 2.8% of all school starters.

⁹ In the school year 2005/06, 6743 children attended the pre-primary level, that is 7.3% of all school starters. These data refer to October 1st of this year. The number of children enrolled in the pre-primary level usually increases in the course of the school year by about 30% (cf. BMBWK, 2004a, p. 9)

¹⁰ The names have been literally translated. Translator's note

differ in their structural organisation of primary school, their general conditions for the establishment of separate pre-school classes (required number of pupils, procedure modalities), and also in their pedagogical preferences.

In general terms, pre-school education has a compensatory function for children of school age who are not yet ready for school. However, there is one exception to this principle which concerns a very small group: If a child who is under school age is prematurely enrolled at school, and it turns out within the first months that the child is not ready for school, his/her parents can enrol him/her in the pre-primary level. This pre-primary school year will not be counted toward the compulsory school years, unless the child reaches the ninth grade before his/her ninth year at school, which is only possible if he/she skips at least one grade.

A further important innovation of the interface between kindergarten and *Grundstufe I* is that, since 1999, in *Grundstufe I*, a child is no longer bound to attend only one grade within one school year. In order better to meet the learning situations of pupils and to avoid too much or too little challenge, children can attend classes of a higher or lower grade during the school year. There is, however, only limited data on the frequency of such a practice due to the restructuring of the Austrian School Statistics. In the school year 2005/06, 2.7% of all Austrian pupils in *Grundstufe I* moved to another grade.¹¹

Heterogeneous Schuleingangs-classes: a New Challenge for the Transition from Kindergarten to *Grundstufe I*

It is without any doubt a success of the current regulations concerning the interface between kindergarten and *Grundstufe I* that now each child of school age – regardless of whether he/she is ready for school or not – will be educated and supported at a school. Policy-makers have abolished the option to take children from school in case they cannot live up to the requirements, which meant a negative experience for them right at the beginning of their school career. Thus, an end has been put to discrimination especially against children in rural regions. However, a solution has not yet been found for a selection-free school start. Although currently all children of school age can attend primary school, the concept of readiness for school still persists. At present, selection occurs when for each child the decision has to be made, whether he/she should start in the pre-primary level or in the first grade.

The more flexible learning times of *Grundstufe I* must be generally seen in a positive light. Through the changing between and the skipping of grades, gifted children can complete *Grundstufe I* within one year, while children with learning difficulties might need three years without having to repeat a class. However, the more flexible learning times have also

¹¹ Source: J. Steiner, Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture, Section V/1, Educational information, documentation and statistics; Date: 9.2.2007

led to some problematic implications: If the pre-primary level is held as a separate class, the change from the first grade to the pre-primary level entails a change of the learning group, which is quite similar to the change to a pre-school class in former times. If the pre-primary level is integrative, the change between grades is seen as especially problematic when individual children of the pre-primary level receive education in a relatively homogeneous group of children of the first grade (Stanzel-Tischler, 1997). Also the fact that pre-primary school children educated in Schuleingangs-classes have to attend the first grade again in their second year at school was already criticised by some parents during the pilot projects (Stanzel-Tischler and Grogger, 1997), and is still rejected by some parents. Their skepticism vis-à-vis Schuleingangs-classes is sometimes so strong that they register their children for one year of education at home and send him/her to a kindergarten meanwhile. In the subsequent year the child is enrolled in the first grade (Stanzel-Tischler, 2007).

The best solution for this problematic situation could be the setup of age-heterogeneous learning groups at all school locations at least at the level of *Grundstufe I*. Corresponding models have already been developed (e.g. Weidinger et al., 1997; Reichmayr, 2001), however, they are still quite seldom put into practice. This is due to various reasons:

- a) The suggested models of heterogeneous classes cannot be implemented with equal success at all school locations, since the number of pupils might vary from school to school. Small schools, which will increase in number due to ever fewer pupils, will automatically set up age-heterogeneous, Schuleingangs-classes, whose advantages are partly acknowledged, and are also used for better education (e.g. Grabher, 2002). However, in many small schools the traditional class-separated education type, which does not optimally benefit from the advantages of mixed age groups, still prevails (Busch and Reinhart, 2006). Medium-sized schools with sufficient pupils for a separate class per grade would need more staff – at least at the beginning – if they wanted to introduce heterogeneous education models.
- b) Even more crucial than the organisational considerations is the fact that the wish for homogeneous classes is still firmly entrenched in the minds of many teachers and the education authorities – although the actual heterogeneity of pupils in the different grades is quite evident (Kertelics, 2001). The wish for homogeneous classes is related to the current grade structure of the Austrian school system and its high selectivity, which goes hand in hand with the diversity of compulsory school types and the fact that weak pupils might repeat grades. Except for the interface of kindergarten and *Grundstufe I*, in the mainstream school system classes which comprise various grades only exist at small schools, where the small number of pupils leaves no alternatives.
- c) What has influenced the teachers' attitude towards Schuleingangs-classes negatively is that, due to cost cutting shortly after their introduction, the number of staff allocated to this education form has declined in comparison to the pilot project period. In addition, teachers have rated pre-school classes in comparison to Schuleingangs-classes better, since the former have lower numbers of pupils and better material equipment (Gerl and Vondracek, 2002).
- d) Heterogeneous classes require more strongly individualised education than homoge-

- neous grade classes. Individualised education can only be provided in smaller learning groups than currently exist, and only through teamwork (Grubich-Müller, 2004). Moreover, teachers are currently insufficiently prepared for the high pedagogical requirements of individualised education (Wolf, 2001; Prexl-Krausz, 2006).
- e) In some Austrian provinces it is obligatory to provide separate pre-school classes if there are sufficient qualified pupils (Amt der Tiroler Landesregierung, 2006). In addition, children of school age yet not ready for school are entitled to attend kindergarten for another year only if no separate pre-school class can be established in their home community.¹² This illustrates that pre-school classes and Schuleingangs-classes are not considered to be equal by the system itself. This is another reason why many teachers and parents lack confidence in the quality of Schuleingangs-classes.

Enhanced Networking of Kindergarten and School

At present, the improvement of the transition from kindergarten to primary school is considered to be a crucial goal of the education sector (Bundeslanzleramt, 2007). In this context, early language promotion (BMBWK, 2005a).¹³ is an important starting point for an enhanced collaboration of the two institutions. Even before this initiative, collaboration of kindergarten and school in the field of prevention and a smooth transition between the two institutions had been called for to enable children to have an optimal school start without experiencing failure (e.g. Lanzelsdorfer, 1972; Woltron, 1997). As for the new design of the interface between kindergarten and Grundstufe I, pilot projects were carried out only at primary schools. The involvement of kindergarten pedagogues had not been explicitly intended (Kahr and Kahr, 1996) and hardly ever occurred in practice (Stanzel-Tischler and Grogger, 1996).

One reason for the lack of cooperation at that time can be seen in the different competences of kindergarten and school. A common concept would have required intensive and complex cooperation at the level of administration. The distance between kindergarten and primary school cannot, however, only be related to administrative factors, but is also enhanced by the diverging concepts of education of the two institutions: Though the young child and his/her optimal development and promotion is in the focus of kindergarten (Hafner and Minich, 2005) and primary school (BMBWK, 2005b), both institutions aiming at the improvement of the child's emotional, social, cognitive and motor competences, clear divergences are still apparent in the way they see learning. The kindergarten laws of most Austrian provinces refer to methods of infant pedagogy, emphasise the necessity of playing and the educational influence of a community. Seven provinces¹⁴ explicitly state that in kindergarten no «school-like education» may take place and that rigid

¹² Cf. section 11 of the Childcare Act of Salzburg: <http://ris.bka.gv.at/lr-salzburg/> [March 28, 2007]

¹³ Information and material on this project can be acquired on the website <http://www.sprachbaum.at/statisch/sprachbaum/de/startseite.ihtml> [March 9, 2007]

¹⁴ Cf. the Kindergarten and Childcare Acts of Carinthia, Lower Austria, Upper Austria, Salzburg, Styria, Vorarlberg, and Vienna. Available at: <http://ris.bka.gv.at/> [March 14, 2007]

timetables and scheduled lessons are not permitted. In contrast, in primary school playing is only important on the pre-primary level. There, playing is not only seen as a didactic measure within the curriculum, but is also broadly represented on the time table: Of 20 lessons per week, 6 to 7 lessons are reserved for physical exercise, sports and playing. Although the curriculum states in the subsequent grades that learning by playing should be employed as a learning form appropriate for children, «playing» is no longer included on the time table. In the first and second grade, physical education and sports cover only two out of 21 lessons per week (BMBWK, 2005b).

Now, policy makers of both the kindergarten and primary school field have acknowledged that an effective cooperation of both institutions is a necessary, though not the only, prerequisite for a successful transition from kindergarten to primary school. School and kindergarten authorities recommend that children get to know their future school and teacher already before school start via «taster days». Likewise, the first parent-teacher conferences should be scheduled before school start (e.g. Landesschulrat für Vorarlberg, 2006). These recommendations are often put into practice. The exchange of methodical-didactical considerations, and mutual acquaintance with the field of work of both branches of education are further opportunities which are aspired to (e.g. Magistratsabteilung 10, 2006). The Teacher Training Colleges, starting operation in autumn 2007 – which will not include the training of kindergarten pedagogues, despite the recommendation of OECD (2006) – are intended as places of further training for both institutions (e.g. Schachl, 2007). In the provinces, over the past years, joint inquiries of heads of kindergartens and schools were held and further training events were organised for teachers of both institutions (e.g. Schluga and Eder, 2005; Berufsgruppe, 2006). Neighbouring kindergartens and primary schools organised mutual visits and joint projects (e.g. Amt der Steiermärkischen Landesregierung, 2006).

Apart from a better exchange between the institutions and joint projects, emphasis must also be put on the individual situation of transition of the individual child, since it is necessary for a successful and encouraging transition that parents, kindergarten pedagogues, primary school teachers and the child collaborate (Griebel, 2004). The exchange of information on the child's competences and special characteristics plays an important role in long-term support. It is further necessary to include the parents in the information transfer processes between kindergarten and school, not only for legal reasons, but also from a pedagogical point of view. This is especially necessary if the child presents a special need, be it due to a disability or a developmental delay. The cooperation of parents, kindergarten, and school, however, requires the willingness of all parties involved to cooperate. With school enrolment, new challenges arise not only for the child, but also for his/her parents, which may go hand in hand with concerns (Meister-Wolf, 2004). Moreover, the image mothers have of the developmental stage of their children – and this is especially true for children with behavioural disorders – does not always correspond to reality (Deimann et al., 2005). Due to these factors, some parents may wish that their children should have a «fresh start» when they change from kindergarten to school, and are therefore not willing or able to cooperate with kindergarten and school. On the part

of the institutions, currently no binding requirements for a structured exchange exist, which consequently depends on the goodwill of all persons involved.

It would therefore be useful that parents would do more than just give their written consent to information exchange between kindergarten and school, as is currently the practice.¹⁵ The communicative situation at the interface of kindergarten and school should rather be clearly defined with respect to the following aspects: Which persons are involved, which issues are to be settled, and which time schedules are to be observed? Another issue to be taken into account is the establishment of regulations on the involvement of therapists and physicians in the transition process, since some provisions targeted for children in kindergarten are set.¹⁶ As a consequence, exchange could happen in all eventualities of transition, and not only if a problem emerges or is anticipated. Moreover, instead of a dialogue on the child, the situation should be discussed with the child, taking into account his/her wishes and expectations. Thus, the data protection regulations could cease to pose an obstacle and should become an opportunity for a successful school start (Griebel, 2006).

Project «I'm Starting School – So What?»¹⁷

In Burgenland, where the respective pedagogical and political stakeholders¹⁸ have been working on a better cooperation between kindergarten and school, in Neuhaus a.K., a village with about 1 000 inhabitants, the local kindergarten and the primary school, which comprises two classes, have been closely cooperating since the school year 2003/04. The teacher of the future Schuleingangs-class visits the kindergarten for three lessons a week to support all children who will start school the subsequent year in their linguistic, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional competences according to their individual state of development. These provisions are flexibly arranged, and are prepared and revised together with the kindergarten pedagogue. If necessary, a speech therapist is involved. Emphasis is put on language promotion, especially on the promotion of the phonological awareness which is crucial for the acquisition of written language (Kammermeyer, 2003). The programme by Forster and Martschinke (2002) has proved successful in this respect.

Apart from the enhancement of the children's competences, curiosity and joyful expectations of the period of life to come should be encouraged. In addition, a stressless and

¹⁵ Parents provide written statements of consent to permit kindergarten and school to exchange information in the framework of early language promotion without violating data protection laws. Cf. e.g. http://www.verwaltung.steiermark.at/cms/dokumente/10183665_5045344/961589e4/Rundschreiben%201-2007.pdf [March 20, 2007]

¹⁶ Cf. Kindergartenvorsorge neu (kindergarten provisions new) in Vorarlberg at <http://www.aks.or.at/informationen-fuer-fachleute/kindergarten/kindergarten-vorsorge-neu/> [April 2, 2007]

¹⁷ The description of the project is based on the project report by the project group G. Potetz, R. Lafer, A. Deutsch and R. Fellner, and on my own research.

¹⁸ Cf. the Resolution of the Provincial Parliament of Burgenland ZI. 19-77 of November 23, 2006 at http://www.burgenland.at/media/file/379_15PRO.pdf and the discussion on the establishment of a Education Directorate at http://www.burgenland.at/media/file/184_13WPRO.pdf.

harmonious school start would help both parents and children. In this respect, it must be ensured that topics of the first grade will not already be dealt with in kindergarten, and that the competences of the kindergarten teacher are not curtailed.

The experiences so far have shown that children who have been participating in the support programme have developed a substantial familiarity with speech sounds and syllables already in their first year at school, while children from other kindergartens still have shown considerable need for support. Other effects also became evident in kindergarten: The children participating in the support programme passed on much to the younger children, so that the provisions could be expanded over the years. The opportunity to participate in a playful way in the support provisions is very well accepted by children and parents. The school administration considers this programme so positive that they plan to implement it in the whole school district.

The programme presented has been designed for regions where children of a kindergarten continue their education in the same primary school. Personal contact between the children, their parents and their future teachers is already established in kindergarten. Thus, mutual confidence can grow through the experiences during the support programme. Information exchange between all involved in the transition to primary school is an automatic consequence. Teachers get to know the skills and specific characteristics of their future children, and can thus adapt the first lessons at school directly to the children's needs. The model practised in Burgenland is, however, only of limited use to urban regions where children go to different primary schools after kindergarten. For this case, other forms of collaboration between school and kindergarten must be developed and put to the test. A common concept of education for both institutions and joint initial and further training would, indeed, contribute its mite to enhance integrative work on the part of kindergarten and primary school pedagogues.

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Do four-to-eight-year-olds learn and develop better together?

Development projects and pilot trials with mixed-age learning groups in the foundation phase of school in Switzerland's German-speaking cantons

— *Urs Vögeli-Mantovani* and *Brigitte Wiederkehr Steiger*

In Switzerland pre-school (kindergarten) and primary school are two different institutions, although both belong to the education sector. Transition from pre-school to primary school is abrupt and may cause the first experience of failure for many children (such as being forced to repeat a year or being selected into special classes). Pre-school duration varies between one and three years. Even though school entrance is based on «school readiness», there are large differences in knowledge and skills among children entering the first year of primary school.

In order to make the transition from pre-school to primary school smoother and more flexible, the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) invited the cantons to experiment with new forms of school entrance, linking the two years of pre-school with either the first year of primary school (Grundstufe) or the first two years of primary school (Basisstufe¹). At the time of writing, all the German-speaking cantons are involved in a large experimental school project, eleven of them with pilot classes. In the pilot classes, children learn in mixed age groups, are taught by two teachers (team teaching) and the pedagogical concept is focused on development and learning. Children can pass through this first phase of education at their individual pace, and children with (learning) disabilities are included in it.

Since the very beginning of the project, two evaluations, one formative and the other accumulative, have been studying the effects of the general environmental conditions on the development in the performance of children in the Basisstufe and in the pre-existing model. In 2010, substantiated results will be available from the longitudinal evaluation, along with recommendations, providing a sound basis for taking educational-policy decisions.

Up to the present, pre-school attendance in most Swiss cantons has been a matter of parental choice. Compulsory schooling starts with primary school entrance when children are six years old. In 2007, however, the Cantonal Ministers of Education are to decide whether pre-school (2 years) ought to become compulsory, which would mean that compulsory pre-schooling-plus-schooling would then have to start when children were four years old, in order to give all children the opportunity of being well prepared for school.

The traditional Swiss structure with kindergarten and primary school

In order to understand the Swiss educational setup, it is important to know that both the period of compulsory schooling and that of pre-school are matters for the constituent

¹ There appear to be no satisfactory English terms that really mean the same as Grundstufe and Basisstufe. For that reason, it has been decided to keep the German terms.

bodies of the Confederation (i.e. the cantons) and that there is no such institution as a (central) Swiss federal ministry with responsibility for this phase of school education. Even today, Switzerland's cantons still enjoy a vast measure of autonomy in deciding on what education to offer, the targets pursued and the educational structures from kindergarten through to the end of lower secondary school. Efforts to achieve coordination have been repeatedly launched by the Conference of the 26 Cantonal Ministers of Education. In 1970, for instance, that Conference brought about the adoption of a concordat laying down a number of key structural elements, such as the start of the school year and its minimum duration (38 weeks), as well as the duration of compulsory schooling, namely nine school years. It seems very likely that a second concordat with the name of Harnos² will be adopted before the end of 2007. This will determine the structures of schools and the period of compulsory schooling, which is to start two years earlier, i.e. as of when children reach the age of four instead of six. For the first time ever, national educational standards are to be formulated and introduced throughout Switzerland.

It is not possible to describe the Swiss school system other than through a description of the school systems of 26 cantons, which are noticeably different in several characteristics. A summary comparison will normally show that each characteristic has two or more expressions, and this is certainly also the case when it comes to the schooling of four-to-eight-year-old children. The only element that is uniform throughout the whole of Switzerland is the transition from the pre-school stage (kindergarten) to the primary stage, which takes place in August or September. Even the compulsion (or otherwise) to attend kindergarten and the earliest possible age for starting there vary. In 18 cantons kindergarten attendance is voluntary, while it is compulsory in eight of them. Compulsory schooling lasts nine school years. The eight cantons that have made kindergarten attendance compulsory have informally extended the duration of compulsory schooling by one or two years to ten or eleven years.

Variants in the possible duration of kindergarten attendance:

Possible duration / Age at entry	Voluntary	Compulsory (1 or 2 years)
1 year / starting at age 4+	4 cantons	1
2 years / starting at age 3+	13	7
3 years / starting at age 2+	1	–

Although 19 of the 26 Swiss cantons make provision for attending kindergarten on a voluntary basis only, the quota of children aged five-plus actually attending kindergarten is greater than 90% taking Switzerland as a whole and is virtually 100% for children aged six-plus. The attendance rates for three- and four-years-olds are only 4% and 35% respectively, which can be explained by the fact that a mere two cantons make provision for kindergartens for children in this age bracket. The national mean for the time spent at kindergarten is 1.9 years per child. The de-facto high level of attendance already reached shows clearly that the step to making kindergarten compulsory is going to affect no more

² HARMonisation of Obligatory School in Switzerland

than a small number of additional children and parents in practice.

Varying targets and concepts in kindergarten and primary school

Education in kindergarten has been traditionally focused on the children's development. One of the main aims has been to attain «school readiness», although there were no binding guidelines or specific educational targets for what this meant until the 1990s. In the German-speaking part of Switzerland, Canton Berne produced a kindergarten curriculum in 1999. Many other cantons have adopted this curriculum since then and now focus on the holistic promotion of general technical, personal and social skills, but not on learning targets for individual disciplines.

School, on the other hand, is focused on learning, which is determined by each canton's curriculum and teaching materials. Traditionally, a child's educational career actually begins when they start school, with learning targets and requirements that have a strong disciplinary focus. The wording used for describing these targets is very similar in the educational laws of all the cantons, typically: «The children are to develop their intellectual, creative, bodily and artistic skills and to develop the ability to acquire fundamental knowledge. Children are to develop a sense of responsibility towards themselves, their fellow human beings and the world around them, and they are also to be stimulated in intellectual and religious growth.» (SKBF/SCCRE 2006, 59)

These differing directions pursued by kindergarten and primary school have been diverging more and more over the decades and were never called into question. Put in extreme terms, kindergarten has been focused on free play, guided activities and growing-up processes, whereas primary school has been focused on formal education and has thus been built on a target-based teaching/learning process and, particularly in its first year, on acquiring the «three R's»³. This stark contrast, along with the resulting reinforced identities of each of the institutions and the professional activity within them mean that the transition from kindergarten to school involves crossing the boundary line between different perceptions and practices, with very considerable potential for conflict.

Problems with the boundary line between kindergarten and primary school

To a large extent, the boundary line between kindergarten and primary school is selective by its very nature. By the time of this transition, it is expected that all children entitled to make the transition on account of their age ought to have acquired «school readiness», for which, however, no precise definition exists. «School readiness», as the criterion for starting school, gives hardly any consideration to the many differences that exist amongst children of the same age. The heterogeneity within an age cohort is inadequately catered for on account of the assumption of homogeneity that primary school harbours towards

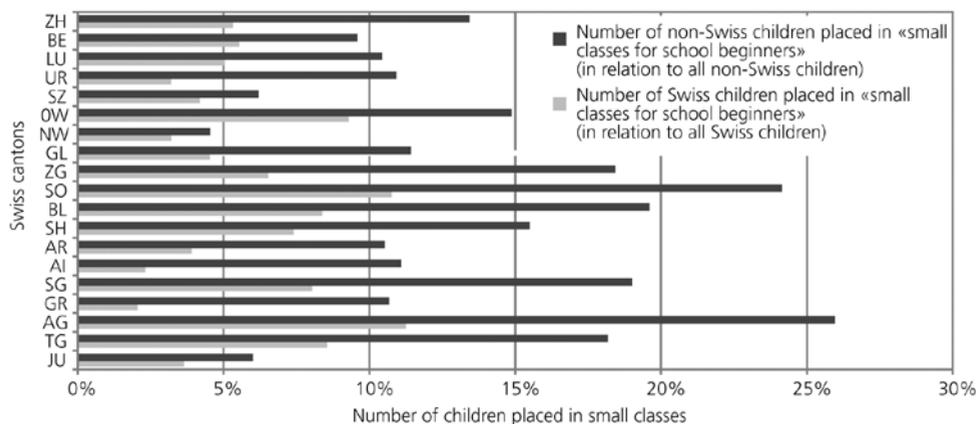
³ Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic

its new recruits.

The statistics for this transition show that the hurdles involved are too high for many children. They fall short of «school readiness» and experience their first selection in the form of a delay in their educational career. In cases like this, children without adequate «school readiness» are either referred back to kindergarten, where they spend another year or are assigned to special «small classes» for school beginners with learning difficulties, in which the material normally to be learnt in the first year of primary school is slowed down, and learning it is spread over two years. A third departure from what would have been defined as the normal educational career involves repeating the first year of primary school.

So the transition to primary school is the first selection hurdle standing in the way of equity of opportunities. Moreover, it is more likely that non-Swiss children and boys will fall foul of this selection mechanism than will Swiss children or girls. One example of this is to be seen in the composition of children assigned to special small school-beginners' classes broken down by national origin for 19 cantons that practise such classes:

Numbers of non-Swiss and Swiss children placed in special small classes for school-beginners in the 2003/04 school year



Source: SKBF/SCCRE 2006, p. 48

To date, nobody has produced any evidence to show that measures along the lines of slowing down a child's initiation to school might serve the purpose of enabling the child to catch up on the required set of skills to such an extent that the rest of their educational career would be assured and that their educational opportunities thereafter would be improved. On the contrary, an evaluation of the special small school-beginners' classes in Canton Solothurn (SO in the diagram above) has shown that such measures do not lead to a better integration of children with a migration background. Even after two years in a special small class, the majority of children from immigrant families have significantly lower cognitive skills as well as a below-average knowledge of the language of tuition, and many of them are still not ready for integration into normal classes (Coradi-Vellacott, 2005, p. 52).

What then is to be done to improve the effectiveness and equity of opportunities at the pre-school educational stage and the transition to primary school? A number of promising replies to this question have emerged from research work.

Two studies⁴ conclude that all children (no matter what their social and cultural background) benefit from attending a pre-school institution. This (and, more especially, the improved educational opportunities for disadvantaged children) can only be attained through high-quality teaching. There are two central preconditions for reaching such a quality level:

1. The pre-school institutions must regard themselves as educational institutions staking an educational claim; and
2. The teachers must have been excellently trained (Wannak et al., 2006, 44).

Three Swiss studies have shed light on the fact that some children already have appreciable skills in mathematics, reading and vocabulary at the age of four – and even more so when they start school. They satisfy the requirements and/or learning targets for kindergarten or the first year of school ahead of time. The studies also show that possession of these skills correlates with the child's social and cultural background (Wannak et al., 2006, p. 45). This finding also makes it clear that the preconditions for learning are very unevenly distributed.

Proposed solution: *Basisstufe*

Attempts to achieve pedagogical and organisational continuity at the transition from the world of kindergarten to that of school had already been set in train even before evidence was produced of the absence of equity of opportunities at the transition from kindergarten to the infant classes of primary school and before the research results had brought out the lack of uniformity in the distribution of skills before initiation to school and had further shown up the effectiveness of making an early start on educational work.

In SIPRI, the nationwide Swiss project that was conducted in the 1980s to examine the primary-school situation, the idea of a fluid transition was already propagated, to be guaranteed especially by the teachers concerned, who would bring the didactics and methodologies of the two stages closer to one another. «By reinforcing the coordination between teachers/supervisors of kindergartens and primary teachers, there will be better coordination between kindergarten and primary school, and the transition will become more fluid. A form of primary-school transition, which is individualised and holistic, emphasises experience and also encourages and shapes autonomous learning, allows children to experience continuity between kindergarten and primary school, and it is thus easier for them to learn and process what is new when they enter school» (SIPRI 1986, p. 65).

⁴ EPPE (The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education) is a longitudinal study with 3000 children in schools in the United Kingdom (Sylva et al. 2004).

ECCE (European Child Care and Education Study) examined the quality of pre-school institutions in Germany, Austria, Portugal and Spain on the basis of the available educational statistics (ECCE 1999).

The first common course of study for pre-school and primary-school teachers was created in Canton Basel-Landschaft in 1996. By the time of writing, 11 out of Switzerland's 16 «universities of teacher education» (PH/HEP) are issuing a teaching diploma entitling the holder to teach at both kindergarten and primary-school level.

In 1997, a study group submitted the proposal to devise a system for the schooling and education of all four-to-eight-year-olds in a single school stage that would have its own particular profile. That was the birth of a concept for the *Basisstufe*, in which two years of kindergarten as well as the first and second classes of primary school would be placed together as parts of the same institution. The aims of this structural change have remained the same up to the present and have drawn considerably on the experience with the *ba-sisschool* in the Netherlands:

- early school start at age four instead of age six
- educational continuity throughout this age phase
- continuous, proactive stimulating of learning processes
- abolition of selection and the boundary line for starting school, and
- recognition of the heterogeneity of individual degrees of development and prerequisites for learning and making productive use out of these.

Developments that have been going on in parallel, such as the discussion regarding bringing down the age for starting school, planning and introducing whole-day establishments and the new concept for special educational arrangements, all provide consistent backing for the idea of the *Basisstufe*.

The characteristics underlying the concept of the *Basisstufe*, to be based on educational and structural continuity, are:

- the *Basisstufe* comprises four years of education: two years of kindergarten and two years of the infant classes of primary school;
- the age composition of the classes is mixed;
- each class is in the hands of two or three teachers. They share responsibility for tuition, and the time available to them is roughly 1.5 FTE's (full-time equivalent posts);
- the general rule is that all children are to be integrated in the *Basisstufe*;
- the curriculum for the *Basisstufe* is designed to cover a four-year period. Depending on how individual children progress through the learning and development processes, it is possible for them to complete the four-year *Basisstufe* in three years or to take five years over it; and
- transition to primary school proper is now to be generally two years later. The decisive consideration is attaining the learning targets set in the curriculum.

The advantages of the *Basisstufe* compared with institutional separation are twofold: Seen in social terms and from the point of view of educational policy, the investment in starting school education at an earlier age ought to optimise educational opportunities and educational careers, so that, in particular, children from families whose parents are not bothered with education can benefit from early support.

Both the educational remit and the teaching quality need to be refocused. Play-based and cognitive learning both have their part in an attitude towards teaching and learning and must adapt to children's diversity. The asynchronous development of children's skills constitutes a central pedagogical and didactic challenge, made even tougher on account of the mixed-age composition of classes. In addition, acquiring the «three R's» (as the fundamental skills for further learning) is to have a higher, binding priority. The age-based perception must be replaced by a new perception that considers the learning stage effectively reached, leading to a marked individualisation and internal differentiation.

At present, the *Basisstufe* is being supported by Harmos, the Swiss nationwide educational-policy development project, in that a new eleven-year duration of compulsory schooling is to be introduced, beginning in the year following a child's fourth birthday. Harmos is thus preparing the way for an early school start, but is not setting out to define the structural shape of the new educational stage, given that pilot tests with the new *Basisstufe* are still ongoing and the evaluation of the results as well as the final report are still not going to be available for some time.

Eleven cantons testing the *Basisstufe*

School pilots

In 2002, the cantons in the eastern part of Switzerland decided to run the «development project on education and schooling in kindergarten and infants' school» under the auspices of the Eastern Section of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education. The *central elements* of the development project are the joint, coordinated drawing up of educational principles, a comprehensive exchange of information and a joint evaluation concept.

No matter how much the concepts of working together and coordination are emphasised, it is impossible to brush aside the fact that each canton has the right of self-determination in a federal system. This is illustrated in the decisions presented below.

Both the planning and the execution of the school experiments as well as the choice and detailing of the general framework conditions for the two models of *Basisstufe* and *Grundstufe*⁵ fall within the exclusive powers of each of the participating cantons. The targets for each of the two models (i.e. optimisation of the children's educational opportunities), remain the same and thus ought to be examined in the context of the broadly-based evaluation.

The *funding* for the development project is to be provided *pro rata* by each of the cantons involved, according to a coefficient based on resident populations. The costs of the actual

⁵ For reasons of educational policy, the pilot is not limited to the *Basisstufe* of four years, but includes the *Grundstufe* too, with the same objective, but lasting only three years and ending after one year of primary (infants') school rather than after two years.

pilots being run in eleven cantons are to be borne solely by those cantons and the communes concerned.

Up until the time of writing, the project has grown into a unique, comprehensive, voluntary and cooperative undertaking with the participation of a majority of the Swiss cantons. In 2007, all the 21 cantons that are either German-speaking or bilingual are participating in the project. Eleven of these cantons are running school pilots. A total of 151 classes and approximately 3000 children are involved.

New reception concept, 2005



Source: SKBF/SCCRE 2006, p. 42

The joint development targets call for a large volume of project-specific foundation work:

- development of the educational foundations for the «4-to-8-framework concept»
- formulation of the educational remit for the school-entrance stage
- development of diagnostic instruments to show where children need particular support, as well as new didactic materials and learning tools, such as a competence grid for appraising German as the child's first language, and diagnostic instruments focused on detecting support needs (recording levels of acquired learning)
- devising and introducing educational continuity and continuous, proactive stimulation of the various learning processes
- review of educational contents and facilitation of didactic innovations (play-based learning)
- investment in early education rather than in «remedial education»
- committed and effective cooperation of all the parties involved, especially the teachers, and
- coordination of the organisational framework conditions with the pedagogical and didactic targets to be attained.

Make-or-break points in the pilot and the preconditions for its success

At the time of writing, it is simply not yet possible to make any dependable statement as to what the possible make-or-break points might be or as regards what might be the preconditions for success. The first reason for this is that no properly underpinned evaluation data is available as yet. The second reason is that developments concerning education up to the end of the lower-secondary level are subject to their own dynamic effects in the educational policy of each individual Swiss canton, and these are often difficult to foresee. Despite that, the authors of this contribution feel it would be remiss of them to shy away from at least trying to consider some of the experience of the pilot classes up until the time of writing.

Resource requirements

The current general conditions for the pilot school classes in the individual cantons depend on the conditions (general framework) laid down by each canton as well as the legal bases. Both of these differ greatly between cantons. For that reason, it already appears probable that the evaluation is not going to be able to go beyond limited declarations as regards the desirable general environmental conditions. There is still a need for clarity to be brought into the discussion as regards necessary and additional resources for handling a group of pupils of mixed ages as well as the skill profile for teachers working in the *Basisstufe*. The implementation of block times, or structuring what is offered when during the course of the school day, also need to be considered ahead of the generalised introduction of the *Basisstufe*.

If the *Basisstufe* is to become a reality, it is also going to be necessary to reformulate the teachers' professional tasks. It is absolutely essential to reconsider the allocation of resources per class and/or per unit within the school.

Another decisive precondition for successful implementation is whether or not the process of structural and professional change is going to lead to an attractive work setting for teachers, in which there is going to be a trustworthy counterbalance to a massive shift in teachers' tasks and roles in the guise of satisfying expectations of solutions to problems, reduced loads and a feeling of fulfilment.

What is «shared responsibility for tuition»?

Until not so many years ago, sharing tuition and even sharing responsibility for tuition were not very widespread concepts in the theoretical thinking and practical actions of teachers. Each and every teacher used to be primarily responsible for their class and for everyone and everything in it.

The initial experience from the pilots shows that the teachers in the experimental classes are looking both seriously and intensively into sharing responsibility for tuition as an opportunity offered to them. Fundamentally, the idea of team teaching enjoys a high level of acceptance. What is at stake is not just an egalitarian use of the pedagogical and didactic

professional cultures of kindergarten and school, but much more the development of a new practical way of providing tuition together and of implementing modified didactics. This presupposes the investment of a very considerable amount of time and also the provision of professional support.

It is appearing increasingly clear that there is going to be a need in future at the *Basisstufe* for teachers with didactic skills spanning various disciplines. In the interests of multi-professionalism, specialist knowledge of various elements (such as remedial education, support for language development, structuring and diagnostics) ought to be represented within each team. In order to attain this, individual team members are going to have to acquire additional qualifications for particular aspects.

The question as to where to position special/remedial education

One of the expectations linked to the introduction of the *Basisstufe* is that it will be possible to halt the upward trend in the amount of special educational support provided for children and possibly even to reduce it. This will be the consequence of more intense and better targeted encouragement and concern for all children throughout the *Basisstufe*. One aspect not yet clarified is in what form and with what resources it might be possible to go as far as to integrate children with disabilities in the *Basisstufe* and what would need to be done to facilitate such a step.

Ambitious success conditions

The targets that have been set for the *Basisstufe* are not going to be easy to attain. It is intended that the institutional merging of strongly individualised and internally differentiated tuition into team teaching will have the effect of avoiding the selection and segregation of children from very different backgrounds. It ought also to be possible, in particular, for children from homes where education is not an issue to complete the first four years of their educational careers more successfully. The measures that cause differentiation, such as being put down a class, repeating a class or attending a special school-beginners' class will no longer exist.

The practical handling of how long children spend in the *Basisstufe* or the evolving practice in this regard is going to be conditioned by the possible further development of the whole primary stage of education. It is the working assumption that the subsequent primary stage will also have to come to terms with issues of integration and equity of opportunities and, like the school-entrance phase, will thus also need to be reorganised. This would represent a new turn in the discussion about greater flexibility.

The time children effectively spend in the *Basisstufe* – three, four or five years – will indicate whether or not greater equity of opportunities has been successfully built up. It is going to be interesting to find out what proportion of all children complete this stage of their education in three or four or five years and to look into the composition of each of these groups. Comparing these ratios with the quotas for those of the current school-entrance programme and other measures will give us an initial indication of the success of

the *Basisstufe* as a whole or at least of its salient features.

Another point to be observed will be whether the measures dispensed with in the *Basisstufe* are going to need to be applied later on, once children have moved into the third year of primary school. Such a situation would be all the more potentially dangerous if the subsequent primary stage were not in any way to attempt to pursue the same targets and practices as the *Basisstufe*. There would then be grounds for fearing that selection, avoiding which is one of the central purposes of the *Basisstufe*, would merely be delayed and simply take place two years later, resulting in the well-known consequences.

Two separate ongoing evaluation projects

Just like the concept for the inter-cantonal *Basisstufe* pilots themselves, evaluating them is also being undertaken jointly. The evaluation has been designed to accompany the process throughout. In this way, any findings regarding the general conditions and impacts on the children's performance and skills can be used to modify the experimental setup. The evaluation is also to be used to produce comprehensive documentation about the experiment, so that it will be possible to take soundly based decisions on the introduction of a particular model (*Basisstufe* or *Grundstufe*).

There are two separate evaluations, one pursuing a formative purpose and the other an accumulative one, and they are both following the project throughout its whole duration.

Formative evaluation

This particular evaluation is studying the course of events with the introduction of the pilot classes and the general setting they are in. The three central questions are:

1. What adaptations and modifications to the pilot appear urgent in the light of experience in introducing it?
2. What would appear to be the optimum and minimum framework conditions?
3. Which methodological/didactic measures seem to be suitable in practice? To illustrate this, here are a few examples from the detailed, wide-ranging questions being asked:
 - How do pupils cope with being in mixed-age groups and learning in heterogeneous groups?
 - Are there any differences between boys and girls in this respect?
 - What impact does tandem teaching (two teachers per class) have on differentiating the tuition offered?

All the groups involved are to be interviewed several times over: teachers, pupils, experts and the steering group. Several different techniques are in use for obtaining data, such as questionnaires, structured interviews and peer reviews.

Accumulative evaluation

This evaluation is looking into children's levels of acquired learning and the development in their increase in learning at different points in time and in relation to their various

socio-economic origins. The central question here is: what differences are to be observed in the levels of acquired learning between the *Grundstufe* (three years) and *Basisstufe* (four years) on the one hand and the traditional school system with kindergarten and primary school on the other hand? Development and learning levels are being measured with various test instruments. Over the five years for which the pilots are intended to run, this evaluation is to capture data several times over for roughly equal numbers of children from the pilot classes and control classes in the eleven cantons participating.

The first outputs and conclusions from them will not be publicly available until 2008, so it is not possible to report on them here.

Pilot to run until 2010

The first public interim report is scheduled to be available in the spring of 2008. The two evaluations are to be concluded in 2009 and are to lead to a final report. The children are to be questioned another two times before the final report is drawn up. The findings that are particularly keenly awaited are the results of the control children at the boundary line between kindergarten and school and the subsequent course of development of the children participating in the school pilots as well as the future development of those children who have already moved on to a higher primary-school (junior) class.

The overall final report is scheduled to be ready for the spring of 2010 and is to contain proposals for actions as well as recommendations to the Cantonal Ministers of Education as the basis for deciding on the possible introduction of the *Basisstufe* or *Grundstufe*.

There is keen interest in the answers to the central evaluation questions, because it is these answers that are going to show whether or not the project for developing the *Basisstufe* will have attained its targets and how good the chances are for it to be introduced throughout Switzerland's German-speaking cantons.

Further and more up-to-date information is available (in German) at:
<http://www.edk-ost-4bis8.ch>

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The connection between pre-primary and primary tradition: work in progress

— *Lina Grossi and Donatella Poliandri*

The Educational System

Brief outline

The history of the Italian Educational System and the evolution of pedagogic theories in Italy have been characterized, over the years, by a tradition of indications and curricula. The first indications concerning primary school education can be traced back to 1969; new ones followed in 1991. In 1985 a new primary school national curriculum was established in substitution to the previous dated 1955. The fore-mentioned indications and curricula were in force until 2004 when a new law (Decreto Legislativo n. 59) reformed both pre-primary and primary school. This new law became effective in the academic year 2004/05 and included pre-primary school in the Italian educational system with the denomination of «Scuola dell'Infanzia».

After nursery school (up to 3 years of age) children may attend the first level of the national school system, that is pre-primary school on a voluntary basis. Enrolment is restricted to children who turn 3 years of age before April 30th of the on coming academic year.

School Levels

Nursery	up to 3 years of age
Pre-primary	3–6 years
1st cycle of education	
Primary	6–11 years
Middle school	11–14 years

According to the statistical data provided by the Ministry of Education in 2005/2006, children enrolled in pre-primary school were 1.662.130. Although pre-primary school is not compulsory, the attendance rate has progressively risen in the last few years determining a very high level of schooling.

Enrolment in primary school has reached 2.790.254 students, much higher than the past years. This increase is the result of new legislation regulating early enrolment: 5-year old children who turn 6 before 30th April may enrol for the on coming school year.

The 1st cycle of education, composed of primary and middle school for a total of 8 years, is considered as the first stage in which the duties and obligations of formal education are carried out. Even if primary and middle school belong to the same educational level, each maintains its specificity.

Primary school lasts 5 years and is divided as follows:

- 1st year functions as a link to pre-primary school
- 1st biennial cycle
- 2nd biennial cycle

Middle school is a three-year cycle formed by a biennial cycle followed by a third year with a national school leaving examination.

State schools may often be comprehensive – from pre-primary to middle school.

School Autonomy and Curriculum: the relationship between the central administration and the territory

In the past, a rigid centralized administration and organization characterized the Italian national school system. A law issued in 1999 (DPR 8 March 1999, n. 275) while maintaining national standards, conferred the right to each school administration to take autonomous decisions in areas concerning school curriculum, timetables, and the organization of classes/learning groups. The introduction of school administrative autonomy has given way to a new phase of the Italian school system. Consequently, the traditional centralization of the national school curriculum has been reduced and made more flexible. School autonomy includes the following fields: teaching methodology, organization, research, experimentation and implementation.

School autonomy and the interaction with territorial bodies constitute the principal framework of the innovative processes in which the entire Italian educational system acts. The Ministry of Education establishes the courses of studies, formative objectives and the criteria regulating school autonomy. The method applied is that of interaction/cooperation between schools and state institutions (regional governments, local authorities, etc.) and other institutional bodies dealing with education. In compliance with the objectives established in Lisbon and the European context of the White Paper (Libro Bianco) the reform of the educational system initiated at the end of the 1990's, has aimed at involving all levels of schooling.

In the 1st cycle of education the Reform has introduced the «National Framework for Personalised Curriculum» (Indicazioni Nazionali per i Piani Personalizzati) and even though still in elaboration, it establishes the basic attainment levels providing quality standards that all schools must guarantee. However, the specific learning objectives listed are not compulsory.

When projecting individual activities, schools must refer to the national framework. The flexibility in the application of the indications allows professionals, working in the field of education, to adapt, interpret and organize objectives according to students' needs and to the social, environmental and economic context.

The central administration establishes common cultural literacy processes in terms of knowledge, skills and specific learning targets for the entire Italian educational system. Consequently, the task of each school administration is to adapt or integrate the above mentioned targets according to the specific context. In some cases this may result in an increase in teaching hours for some compulsory subjects, a flexible timetable, or in adapting organizational procedures to specific needs.

The law on school autonomy has permitted each school to draw up its own «Educational Programme» (Piano dell'Offerta Formativa) which defines projects and activities adopted and includes a complete curriculum that complies with the rules and regulations established by law. The formulation of the «Educational Programme» is the result of the ability in project management and implementation of each school institution and characterises

its cultural specificity.

The curriculum is projected in total cooperation with the social/cultural environment and may also include various learning contexts. Thus each school acts as a link between the indications of the central administration and local requirements.

Curriculum projecting is based on two fundamental criteria: uniform learning standards and personalized learning courses.

Types of schools: state-run and privately run schools

There are three types of schools in Italy: state-run schools, accredited schools administered by state bodies or by private citizens that provide a legally recognised diploma, non-accredited private schools which cannot issue a legally recognised diploma. The latter two are considered non-state schools; as a result of a progressive integration policy of state-run and non-state run schools, very few non-accredited private schools still exist since most of them have been absorbed by accredited schools.

Non-state schools with the highest rate of attendance are nursery schools, while attendance rate at other levels of schooling is modest. Only 6.8% attend non-state primary schools; 3.7% attend middle school.¹

The number of children attending state-run nursery schools has been constant through the years at about 58%. Many children attend non-state schools, 30% accredited and non-accredited schools and 12% accredited schools administered by state bodies as municipalities.

A law issued in 2000 (n. 62/2000) concerning the status of non-state schools has «fully integrated accredited non-state schools into the national educational system recognizing the importance of their role in the public interest as that of state-run schools».²

The law has guaranteed the application of the same criteria and contents in all types of schools by defining the objectives to be attained, and applying the evaluation standards; in fact, by establishing the same criteria for teacher recruitment in accredited non-state schools, presumably a certain uniformity has been reached in teacher qualifications. Uniformity has also been achieved through the linking of didactic policies to an «Educational Programme» (Piano dell'Offerta Formativa).

Moreover, state funding is granted only to non-state nursery schools that are part of a «pre-school integrated system» (comprehensive school institute) that means a coordinate network of schools comprising state, municipal state bodies and non-state run schools. This solution is less expensive for the state rather than having to provide for needs in the entire country.

¹ See La scuola statale: sintesi dei dati - Anno scolastico 2005/2006 – Ministero dell'Istruzione

² Essentially, privately run and non-state schools are, on request, accredited provided that they:

- conform to the regulations governing the state school system and the principles stated in the Italian Constitution
 - accept all enrolment requests including disabled and underprivileged students
 - make budgets public
 - have suitable premises and furnishings
 - have instituted teacher/parent/student committees
 - have hired teacher staff with a contract which conforms to national teacher contracts
- submit to evaluation by the national educational system.

Debate in progress

At present, government policy is concentrated on defining shared parameters and criteria – considering teachers' cultural and didactic experience – in order to reach a final elaboration of National Indications which will be liable to change once the special committee in charge reaches a final decision. It is envisaged that teachers, while working in didactic autonomy and projecting their «Educational Programme» (POF), may extend teaching hours dedicated to extensive learning thanks to an increase in timetable flexibility risen from 15% to 20%.

The misgivings aroused by the concerns that early enrolment in nursery school could lessen educational importance and the fundamental role it plays in child development and transform it into mere child assistance, have brought to a suspension by the central administration of specific measures concerning this issue.

It is not compulsory for schools to compile the portfolio. Any type of documentation which describes the student's course of studies may be used by the school for educational aims and to enhance cooperation/interaction between students/teachers/parents. This type of documentation has no legal value as far as certification or diplomas are concerned.

Pre-primary and Primary Teacher Training

In order to become pre-primary and primary school teachers the following requisites are needed:

- a 5 year secondary school diploma;
- a degree in primary education sciences. The degree course consists of a common two-year course and two branches of specialization: one for pre-primary and the other for primary school. The entire degree course lasts 4 years with 21 exams and a foreign language exam.

Each university defines the key qualifying contents to achieve the formative requirements, the didactic activities and relative credits which refer to the following four areas:

- Area 1: theoretical teacher training
- Area 2: contents of primary syllabus
- Area 3: workshops for didactic planning and simulations of didactic activities
- Area 4: applied teacher training in class to integrate theoretical/practical competences

Graduates are thus qualified teachers and entitled to enter a state competition for pre-primary and primary school teaching posts. Winning candidates are put on a permanent roster.

The recruitment of permanent teachers is done by means of a state exam which also includes an assessment of candidates' qualifications. After acquiring a permanent contract, teachers must complete a trial period during which they attend training courses in addition to everyday teaching activity.

Temporary teaching contracts are divided as follows: a 12 month contract with teachers chosen from a provincial roster and an academic year contract with teachers chosen from a school roster. Both contracts are granted by head teachers.

There are a variety of opportunities for teacher in-service education. Training courses

may be organized by schools, the central administration or other bodies (universities, accredited institutions, etc.).

Basic Pedagogical Concepts

Students' complete independence in facing/resolving problems, cooperating with peers, sustaining and debating personal opinions³, accepting diverse points of view, is the main educational goal. Thus, an autonomous student can deal with problems by making the most of his personal resources.

In this perspective, education focuses more on teaching learning strategies than on memorizing or automatically applying notions and facts. Consequently, school curriculum encourages the development of fundamental competences. This does not imply that overall knowledge is less important. In fact, a competence-based curriculum encourages the student to develop his own personality using the knowledge acquired, not limiting this experience to a class environment.

In the curriculum, knowledge and competences are interrelated and the school, like any other educational environment, develops competences according to its targets and cultural aims. Thus, the competences acquired at school through subject learning are tied to the specificity of the knowledge students are faced with and therefore, are automatically connected to cultural contents.

Students with specific learning needs are included in the mainstream school system and supported by a special needs teacher, thus aiming at complete integration. A law issued in 1977 (n. 577) entitled disabled students attending compulsory school the right to a personalized educational syllabus, the assignment of a special needs teacher in classes with a maximum of 20 students. Law n. 270 issued in 1982 extended this entitlement to children attending pre-primary school.

The number of disabled children attending schools has risen in the last years: a higher percentage can be noted in the first level of education, that is, 2.4% in primary school and 1.1% in pre-primary. A significant number of these students attend state-run schools.

On a national level, the ratio, disabled students to special needs teacher is 2%.

Pre-primary School in Italy

Pre-primary school attendance, distributed in state-run, municipal and accredited schools, is very high, more than 97%. Considering that it is not compulsory, this fact reveals how families are fully aware of the importance of developing socialization, communication, cognitive and perceptive skills in children before primary school education. This awareness also demonstrates the strong need of families, not only from an urban environment, for a reliable and qualified context for the education and protection of their children.

³ See: <http://www.pubblica.istruzione.it/>

As in primary schools, the projecting of the curriculum and the definition of the basic characteristics of didactic activities, is assigned to each school administration. The central government denies itself the task of providing pedagogical/methodological indications; its function, clearly defined in the regulations governing school autonomy, is to provide basic attainment levels and objectives, while school institutions project individual curricula.

The educational model which obtains great consensus among families is the «standard» type; children attend school for at least 8 hours a day. A limited number of parents choose 4 hours part-time attendance (about 9% in state-run schools varying greatly according to geographical areas). Therefore, in 90% of state-run schools canteen services are provided. Primary school attendance has increased slightly since 2001, mainly due to the increasing number of immigrant students.⁴

Pre-Primary School

Not compulsory, children turning 3 before 30th April are eligible for enrolment. It is a 3-year cycle.

Goals	- personal, social, emotional development; physical, cognitive and creative development; religious education is also taught. - contribute to the overall education provided by families. - guarantee continuity and facilitate transition to primary school.
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Annual Lesson Hours	From a minimum of 875 hours (25 hours per week for 35 weeks) for a half-day antemeridian timetable, to a maximum of 1700 hours (48 hours per week for 35 weeks).
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Educational and didactic activities	Regional education offices, relevant regional government offices and local authorities must guarantee and stipulate agreements with both nursery and primary schools in order to establish continuity in educational policies. An established personnel staff or each institution also guarantees continuity.
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Class size	From a minimum of 15 per class up to a maximum of 25 that can be extended to 28 when there is a great request for enrolment. The ratio of children per class is 23.53. ⁵ The ratio of students per teacher is 11.6. ⁶
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Primary School in Italy

The recent reform of primary school establishes a first linking year that aims at students reaching the acquisition of basic skills or, in a wider sense, in acquiring the essential ru-

⁴ See La scuola statale: sintesi dei dati - Anno scolastico 2005/2006 – Ministero dell’Istruzione.

⁵ See La scuola statale: sintesi dei dati - Anno scolastico 2005/2006 – Ministero dell’Istruzione

⁶ ibidem

diments to meet the demands of contemporary society based on communication and knowledge (nota 6).

While waiting for the final draft of legislation concerning the regulation of the pedagogical, didactic and administrative fields of primary education, the Legislative Decree n.59/2004 article 13 provides «National Guidelines». The indications establish that primary school curriculum should contain the following:

- general objectives of learning process;
- specific learning attainments according to the subject. Each subject and primary school level are assigned specific knowledge and skills that will be transformed into individual competences through the learning processes.
- formative objectives and «Personalized Curriculum» (Piani di Studi Personalizzati) are the core of the learning process and it is the task of the school administration and teachers to plan and adapt teaching units according to student's needs.
- lay-out and mode of compilation of the Portfolio which records the competences acquired by each student. The realization of the Portfolio is still being debated because of restrictions laid down by the Guarantor Authorities on Privacy (Autorità Garante della Privacy).

Primary School

Compulsory, children turning 6 before 31 th August are eligible for enrolment. It is a 5 year cycle.

Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- acceptance and promotion of individual diversity including disabilities;- promotion of the development of individual personality and diversity;- acquisition and development of basic knowledge and skills including computer sciences up to the first logical-critical organization of thoughts;- encourage the acquisition of communicative skills in Italian and basic English;- provide basic knowledge in the application of scientific methodology;- enhance interpersonal an orientation skills in time and space;- educate young citizens in respecting social conventions.
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Annual Lesson Hours	Timetable organization is left to individual administrations and vary from school to school, from a minimum of 891 to a maximum of 990 which excludes lunchtime. Optional hours are 99 and attendance is free of charge.
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Educational and didactic activities	Two teachers are assigned to each class. In the first 3 years of primary school, teachers have an 18 hour teaching week (one prevailing teacher). The head teacher guarantees didactic continuity.
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Evaluation	Evaluation of attainment levels reached, student's behaviour/discipline and the certification of the competences acquired are entrusted to the teacher responsible for educational activities projected and included in the Personalized Curriculum.
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Class size	The minimum is 10 students in each class up to a maximum of 25. The ratio of students per class is 18.5. ⁷ The ratio of students per teacher is 10.3. ⁸
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Elements of continuity between pre-primary and primary school

A succession of new legislation has transformed and is still changing the general profile of these types of schools. Nevertheless, consolidated ideas and application of a possible continuity between the two levels of schooling have been employed.

Before legislation established continuity between pre-primary and primary school by Law n.59/2004, the first experiments in this field had previously been carried out at the beginning of the 1980's approved by the Ministry of Education and involved at first the biennial cycle from 5–6 years of age. Subsequently, a wider application of experimental unified curriculum was carried out in the school cycle concerning students from 3–8 years of age.⁹

In 1994 these experiences were nationally organized and developed within the ASCANIO Project – *Attività Sperimentale Coordinata Avvio Nuovi Indirizzi Organizzativi* – that aimed at fulfilling the need of providing pre-primary school with an organizational framework coherent with the cultural project established by 1991 Indications. Some of the acquisitions of the Ascanio project have become a valuable patrimony for pre-primary schooling. Furthermore, the establishment of school autonomy has highlighted the importance of team-teaching, projecting skills, documentation, timetable flexibility and the quality of the overall organization.

Experimentation has proposed curricular routes for the linking-year between pre-primary and primary school by trying to identify the structural, methodological and didactic conditions necessary to guarantee and favour this transition.

In 1998 many teachers took part in the A.L.I.C.E.-Project (*Autonomia: un Laboratorio per l'Innovazione dei Contesti Educativi*) that aimed at encouraging the development of professional competences needed to face the difficult transition from an extremely centralized educational system to a new one based on the autonomy of each school. The main objective was to share and disseminate experimentation and consequently new experiences. This exchange has favoured the projecting of a document which testifies the student's learning process or the so called Portfolio, dossier, in an attempt to unify methodology, evaluation criteria and the choice of teaching materials used in pre-primary and primary school.

⁷ See *La scuola statale: sintesi dei dati - Anno scolastico 2005/2006* – Ministero dell'Istruzione

⁸ *ibidem*

⁹ In 1999 INVALSI (once CEDE – European Centre for Education) decided to undertake a project in order to draw up an evaluation system for pre-primary schools (Project QUASI-Quality System for pre-primary school. See <http://archivio.invalsi.it/ri2003/quasi>; starting from previous international research the Institute had been part of. Therefore, in order to highlight the heuristic/exploratory nature of the survey, quality techniques and in particular, case studies (6 in three different regions) and a focus group (school operators of 30 institutions from three different regions) were employed. This has permitted the gathering of precious results and documents that furnish a historical cross-section of all the activities and didactic innovations of the Italian school system in the past years bringing to the fore qualitative processes.

Horizontal and vertical continuity

The principle of continuity throughout compulsory education is at the basis of the entire education system: ensured horizontally by the cooperation/interaction between various territorial institutions and vertically through cooperation/interaction of different school levels.

As stated and enforced by law (L. 59/2004, art. 1) continuity between pre-primary and primary school is carried out by Regional Education Offices which promote collaboration between regional offices and local authorities to activate infrastructures as canteen and transportation services, adequate premises, cooperation between state-run schools, municipal and accredited schools.

Horizontal continuity implies the interaction between the territorial context, that is the social, geographical and political environment, and each school. It aims at favouring cooperation with the families, primary centre of child education. Furthermore, it also implies the optimisation and employment of all available resources.

Considering the complex Italian geographical situation, experiences of horizontal continuity have been activated between schools of the same level, thus establishing complete cooperation and exchange of common didactic educational routes that compensate in some cases for the geographical isolation some schools may find themselves in, for example in the mountain areas. In practice¹⁰, the realization of projects concerning continuity have been included in the POF (Education Programme) of these schools where an annual quota of hours for student exchange visits during school time have been planned at the beginning of the academic year (up to 20 annual exchange visits).

The importance attributed to continuity is also confirmed by the fact that each school when planning its formative project nominates «key figures» (funzioni strumentali) who are in charge of the implementation of the «Education Programme» (Piano dell'Offerta Formativa) and are paid extra for this role. Resulting data from the INVALSI system questionnaire¹¹ concerning the specific areas assigned to such «key figures» demonstrate that a good majority of state-run schools have appointed a teacher in charge of external relations, including families. In 54% of state-run schools a «key figure» responsible for external relations has been appointed or a teacher coordinator in 30% of schools; in 21% of schools a «key figure» has been appointed for relations with families¹² and in 36% a teacher coordinator.

As far as accredited schools are concerned, rather than as «key figures», teachers are appointed as coordinators who are responsible for a series of issues; 44% of coordinators also deal with external relations and 61% with relations with families.

On-line cooperation is another important contribution to inter-school coordination. INVALSI data demonstrates the widespread participation on-line of both state-run and accredited schools even if the latter choose, for the most part, only one school.¹³

¹⁰ Information collected as part of the Quasi/INVALSI Project.

¹¹ See Servizio Nazionale di Sistema – SNV – System Questionnaire 2005/2006, survey of the total number of Italian schools, a total of 9579 schools participated, that is 79% of schools belonging to 1st level of education (pre-primary, primary, middle school) – 83% of the total state-run schools, 61% of the total accredited schools. Each school filled in one questionnaire containing questions pertaining to its school level. For this reason, they will be referred to as schools responding to the System Questionnaire.

¹² Cf. footnote II. For further information see: <http://www.invalsi.it/invalsi/download.php?page=rissetsistema>.

Moreover, due to agreements and conventions, the obvious counterparts for state-run schools are public institutions such as local bodies, the national health service and law enforcement bodies.¹⁴

Working on-line contributes to optimising resources and facilitates cultural exchanges and confrontation.

The results of the INVALSI System Questionnaire have confirmed that vertical continuity is a widespread practice especially in state-run schools. Pre-primary and primary schools prefer activating projects concerning activities for «in-coming» students and common didactic activities between school levels. In more than 70% of schools, the fore-mentioned projects, which aim at alleviating the difficulties and inconveniences students may encounter during the first months, have been activated; more than 50% plan and implement didactic activities involving continuity between pre-primary and primary school; 1/3 of the schools have started to consider the possibility of planning and applying common evaluation criteria.

The main objective of these projects is not only to facilitate children's transition from pre-primary to primary school, but also to elaborate shared working strategies and material. At the same time the existence of common evaluation criteria applied to communicative and mathematical skills, allow the students to become aware of their personal achievements and experience in a continuous learning process fundamental for the development of their own identity.

In pre-primary school teaching methodology is based on a holistic approach that may be interpreted and applied differently to daily life. One of the most commonly used strategies is the «integrated background» (that can be an imaginary character or situation, a fairy tale character, acting as a guide for students in the various types of workshops – reading, acting, science, environmental labs) which becomes a leitmotiv used by teachers to overcome the fragmentation of didactic activities, to increase emotional involvement and to construct mind-maps that give uniformity to all teaching material. An example of such a learning process may begin with a non-verbal phase (i.e. the building up of a situation or scene in a sandbox using miniature statues of animals¹⁵ followed by a series of intermediate stages that using other types of language (i.e. iconic like a graphically represented scene) will lead to the final phase which is verbal communication (oral report of what the situation means and represents). Thus, the child becomes aware of his/her ability to recognize and decipher the experience (nominal stage) and his/her ability to acquire its contents.

This type of learning process may also involve vertical continuity, that is children from last year pre-primary school and children in 1st year primary.

Another important factor that contributes to vertical continuity is the organization of the teaching staff. It is widespread practice for teachers to work in groups in vertical continuity both in pre-primary and primary schools: 48% in state-run pre-primary schools and 54% in state-run primary schools; a minor percentage (38% ca.) in non state-run schools.

¹³ See Servizio Nazionale di Sistema - SNV – Questionario di sistema 2005-06

¹⁴ ibidem

¹⁵ See Quasi/INVALSI Project.

Flexibility in the organization of annual hours of the school timetable

The hours dedicated to didactic activities is established on an annual basis so that schools can organize their timetable according to the requirements and resources available. In pre-primary school a minimum and a maximum amount of hours is established by law. School administrations may choose according to their school educational programme and the needs expressed by families that have top priority in this choice. An antemeridian timetable is composed of 25 hours per week. It can be extended up to a full-day timetable, for a total of 48 hours a week distributed and organized according to the requests/needs of families, the social/cultural environment and the agreements drawn up with territorial authorities.

In order to face the same demands, primary school timetable establishes a compulsory quota of hours and an optional one. 20% of the compulsory quota can be destined to increase/decrease the amount of hours established for each school subject, or to introduce new subjects: the optional quota permits to differentiate didactic routes and ensures the parents' right to make personal choices. Every academic year, after a detailed analysis of the educational needs, each school administration decides the distribution and time allotment for individual subjects and didactic activities established in the National Indications.

The ever rising demand of families to increase investment in early education – confirmed by widespread school attendance of children between 3 to 6 years of age – has been favoured by the flexibility of timetables schools offer, by the expansion of teaching staffs and by the ever growing importance attributed to educational-didactic planning.

The data collected by INVALSI (National Service for Evaluation) through a «Questionnaire on the evaluation of the educational system» (Questionario di valutazione del sistema scolastico) during the academic year 2005/2006, has produced the following results for primary schools: 69.2% state-run schools and 57.7% non state-run schools have adopted a 30-hour weekly timetable employing the optional quota which proves that it has received widespread consensus.

Other data revealed by the INVALSI Questionnaire regards the annual total amount of hours schools offer through their educational programme:

- in state-run primary schools from 1320 to 1440;
- in non state-run schools from 1144 to 1368.

In state-run primary schools the total ranges from a minimum of 890 to a maximum of 993, while in non state-run schools, the maximum reaches 1003 hours. 20% of the schools surveyed use a flexible timetable, varying the weekly hours quota according to environmental requirements.

Parent teacher student committees

In order to guarantee a homogeneous didactic approach in the two different school levels, supervision and management are carried out by various committees with similar functions and roles.

The head teacher is responsible for the homogeneous management of allotted funds, school facilities and quality results. He/she is both a regional education officer and a civil

servant. The district school committee is composed of elected teachers, non-teachers and parents' representatives, and has the following duties:

- purchasing, renovating and maintenance of school facilities, teaching aids, allotted books and useful material;
- ratifying the general Educational Programme;
- organizing school activities.

The cross-class committee is composed of all the teachers working in parallel classes of the same didactic district and an elected parent for each class. This committee is responsible for:

- planning educational and didactic activities;
- evaluating didactic and behavioural progress of the class;
- promoting innovative, remedial and support initiatives;
- proposing subsidiary and extracurricular activities;
- making suggestions concerning educational and didactic activities (teacher/parent/student relationships) for the teachers' assembly, made up of all the teachers of the same school district or institution and presided by the head teacher.

In the presence of teachers only, it implements interdisciplinary coordination and evaluates students in the short and long term. Long before the vertical teachers assembly was introduced by law, schools had already experimented joint assemblies with teachers from different school levels.

The organization of this type of didactic activity implies a permanent teacher staff working in the school; when this is not the case school management becomes more difficult. The school system pays great attention to teacher staff mobility. According to the INVALSI data, only about 20% of non-state run and state-run school teachers ensure continuity for the entire 3-year cycle.

Data concerning primary schools is more comforting: in fact, teachers ensuring continuity for the entire 5-year cycle reach a percentage of about 50%. This data is probably due to the retirement of a great number of teachers, which has been going on in the last few years and the subsequent teacher staff mobility.

Documentation: personal dossier

The documentation concerning the learning process and, in particular, the child's achieved independence is fundamental to ensure continuity between the different school levels. This documentation is drawn up in collaboration with the child's family so that they may become active participants in the learning process. It records the child's personal history: his/her most meaningful experiences are presented through photos, drawings, brief reports or activities carried out during his/her pre-primary school career.

The adoption of the student's portfolio in pre-primary schools is widespread though with different goals.

One of the main goals is to discuss with parents about their child's progress, a phenomenon which is widely diffused particularly in pre-primary and primary schools (between 60% and 70% ca.).

Pre-primary schools' main aims in adopting the portfolio are to provide the formative process with vertical continuity and to assess behaviours (52% ca.). Other goals are: the evaluation of children's achieved skills and knowledges and the drawing up of a documentation which records different experiences (45%). Non-state primary schools pursue the same aims although they tend to evaluate the learning process mainly in terms of knowledges and skills and to assess and certify competences (the former is not over 69%, the latter 61%).¹⁶

Primary schools have the same trend as non-state pre-primary schools but different priorities: in fact, they privilege the assessment of skills and knowledges and the evaluation and certification of competences (the former being not over 69% and the latter 70%). Moreover, state primary schools highlight the importance of vertical continuity in the formative process (56%), whereas non-state primary schools emphasise the student's responsibility toward his/her own formative process (65%).¹⁷

Organization of learning processes/unitary knowledge

One of the main features that mark the transition from the first year of pre-primary school to the end of primary school is that practical experiences are gradually substituted by topic areas and single subjects in order to achieve a wide unitary knowledge.

In pre-primary and in the first years of primary education, children's experiences and discoveries are characterized by a profound unitary knowledge; later on experiences are given a more structured organization and, even if they are still not subject-based, teachers can promote meaningful culture-directed activities. In the first years of primary school, learning objectives are more explicitly linked to school subjects and are grouped as follows:

- linguistic/communicative
- anthropological
- mathematical/scientific

Consequently, teachers have become familiar with and highlight the importance of learning units, introduced by the Reform. The term learning unit is composed of two words which refer to two key concepts:

- school practise must focus on the learning process;
- guarantee that the knowledge achieved is unitary.

Considering that didactic innovations have been introduced only recently, an increase has been registered in adopting learning units which include similar school subjects (51% in state primary schools and 47% in non-state schools) and in organizing theme based working groups (about 47% of schools).¹⁸

¹⁶ See Servizio Nazionale di Sistema - SNV - Questionario di sistema 2005-06

¹⁷ See Servizio Nazionale di Sistema - SNV - Questionario di sistema 2005-06

¹⁸ ibidem

Collaborative learning: workshops

Workshops are one of the most important components at the basis of educational continuity. They aim at developing mixed-class activities and stream teaching in order to outweigh traditional mono-disciplinary lessons, and integrate action and reflection, theory and practice, interaction and subjectivity. In primary schools a quota of 99 hours is dedicated to workshop activities from which families can choose. Pre-primary schools do not have a fixed annual quota for these activities but students are offered equipped premises where workshop activities are carried out. Very often these premises are used by both school levels thus working together in vertical continuity projects.

Workshops take place in rooms equipped for computer studies, artistic activities (drama, music, dance, mime, etc.), language activities (foreign language learning), projecting activities (environmental care, gardening, etc.), sports, extra and remedial learning.

The INVALSI system questionnaire survey filled in on a voluntary basis by a number of schools, has provided the following data:

- information technology laboratories in 94% state schools and 86.8% in non-state schools;
- artistic activity labs in 88% state schools and 82.1% non-state schools;
- sports and physical activities 67% in state and non-state schools;
- language courses 53.3% in state schools, 66.2% in non-state schools.

Branches of Learning

Besides workshop activities, a cross-curricular methodology is based on Education to citizenship. In the Reform of the 1st school cycle, Education to citizenship refers to 6 educational areas: health, environment, affectivity, citizenship, civil interrelations, nutrition, traffic safety.

Within the educational programme, teachers activate methodological-didactic routes to further develop the child's social and civil responsibility necessary to interiorise the value of correct behaviour both in public and private life. This implies respect not only for the environment, one's own health and well-being, traffic rules, but also for domestic and school milieus.

The educational-formative routes are implemented being well aware that whereas school subjects provide students with the necessary and useful tools to better understand the world around them and be able to interact, the educations constitute the ensemble of behaviours and life styles that increase and make the most of personal experiences in order to improve the individual's life and social environment.

The Education of Pupils Aged 4–8 in the Spanish Education System

— Carmen Ferrero and Consuelo Uceda

Introduction

This article aims primarily to give an overview of pre-primary and primary education; stages which educate pupils aged from 4 to 8. Secondly, the characteristics and needs of pupils between these ages are analysed, taking into account their education from the perspective of development and the curriculum. Finally, with an emphasis on the notion of transition, we reflect on those aspects we consider important in order to achieve continuity throughout this learning period.

Pre-Primary Education in the Spanish System

The Spanish Education Act which has recently been passed, defines pre-primary education as the first stage in the education system, dealing with children aged 0–6. Pre-primary education is divided into two cycles; the first from 0–3 years, the second from ages 3–6. This is a non-compulsory stage. The second cycle is free of charge for all pupils.

In both pre-primary cycles, emphasis is progressively placed on pupils' emotional development, physical movement and motor control, communication and language, the basic rules of social relationships and co-existing with others, as well as discovering the physical and social characteristics of the environment which surrounds them.

In most Autonomous Communities of Spain, the state schools which specifically provide pre-primary education are known as *Escuelas de Educación Infantil (EEI)*. Pre-primary education is also provided in *Colegios de Educación Infantil y Primaria (CEIP)*. In the stage under discussion here, a wide variety of schooling models exists, depending on the Autonomous Community in question and the ownership of the school. In some Autonomous Communities, *EEIS* only provide the first cycle and not the whole stage, which is provided by private schools or publicly funded private centres. Therefore, provision is very varied.

As regards teaching staff, the new Education Act recommends that the person in charge of the teaching plan for the cycle covering ages 0–3 should be a specialist pre-primary teacher, although the children may be cared for by a teacher or other staff who hold appropriate qualifications. In the cycle covering ages 3–6, the children are under the direct charge of a specialist pre-primary teacher. Opinions are currently divided among some sectors of the educational community, concerning this difference in professional profile in the two cycles.

Regarding rates of children who are in formal education, all children aged 4 and over are in education; for children aged 3, the percentage is very high (slightly over 95%) and 17.3% for children aged below 3. Measures have been implemented in order to increase the entry rate for children aged 0–3. These include progressively increasing the number of public places for children aged 0–3 years, as well as offering scholarships and financial assistance.

Primary Education in the Spanish System

The Spanish Education Act defines primary education as the stage of compulsory schooling comprising six academic years which are normally studied between the ages of 6 to 12.

The overall aim of this stage is to provide children with education which will allow them to strengthen and secure their own personal development and well-being, to acquire basic cultural skills related to oral expression and comprehension, reading, writing and mathematics, as well as to develop social skills, work and study habits, creativity and sensitivity.

Primary education is offered through public, private and publicly funded private provision. In state schools, for pupils aged 3–6, primary provision shares the same premises as pre-primary provision. Pre-primary provision, although non-compulsory, is attended by 95% of children of this age. The maximum class size is 25 pupils, who are assigned to a class teacher, and also attend classes offered by specialist teachers in Physical Education, English and Music.

The fact that pre-primary classrooms are located in primary schools, especially those for the three-year-old pupils, means that the facilities, in particular toilets and dining rooms, have to be adapted to the needs of the very youngest children. Sometimes, this adaptation is not ideal, which can cause operational difficulties and adversely affect the level of care given to the pupils at these ages.

Pre and primary school teaching staff currently complete an initial three-year training, leading to the teaching qualification. They can follow specialist options in pre-primary education, primary education, music, physical education, foreign languages, remedial teaching and hearing and language. Following this initial training, teaching staff continue and develop their training at continuing education and teacher support centres (known by different names, depending on the particular Autonomous Community).

Finally, it should be pointed out that all state and private schools as well as publicly-funded private pre-primary and primary schools, integrate pupils with special educational needs into their classes. To meet the needs of these pupils, the schools have specially-trained staff and Guidance Counsellor teams, whose main task is to diagnose the special educational needs of the pupils, provide guidance for support staff and class teachers and to take action regarding those students with special educational needs.

Needs of children aged 4–8: Characteristics of pupils aged 4–8 which should be considered in planning the teaching and learning process

Progressive development and the teaching-learning processes

Both the pre-primary and primary stages are markedly educational in nature. Both include overall individual personal development as one of their objectives. Therefore, the transition from one stage to another must be a process in which the child is the main element, the term «child» being understood as the whole person, together with their needs.

In order to analyse these needs, it is deemed absolutely essential for the development inherent to this age range to be taken into account. Therefore, some specific needs arising from this development are:

- The need to feel safe in an environment which is both physically and emotionally welcoming, in order to progressively achieve self-awareness and self-reliance.
- The need to play, as a way of getting to know, understand and internalise the environment which surrounds them.
- The need to relate to others in order to learn to share, resolve disputes and accept and adopt the rules of peaceful living with others.
- The need to develop learning strategies to meet the challenges which learning in school presents.
- The need to be able to rely on the help, guidance and motivation from the teachers who follow them through the learning process.
- The need to have an adult as a reference to make them feel safe and secure.
- The need to develop a sense of belonging to the group and to express their emotions.

The predominant characteristics of the way in which pupils learn during this age range are related to the need to understand reality in an integral manner, to stay active, to investigate, to feel protected and supported by adults and to belong to a group to firmly establish a positive identity.

As the pupils' ability progressively advances towards specific thought, new skills are acquired, which means that, by the end of the first primary cycle, the child is capable of better distinguishing between the different subjects learned; it is at this point, and not at the start of compulsory education that this change takes place.

In the teaching and learning process for this age range, overall and co-ordinated educational provision is considered most suitable, which avoids presenting the pupil with a fragmented picture, which is not in line with their own development. Provision must contain an educational purpose which takes in the overall personal development of the pupils in the individual as well as the group member aspect.

All of the child's processes of maturation make up one single whole which is inseparable and indivisible from their experience of interacting with their surrounding environment. Any activity in which these children are involved brings emotional, intellectual and psy-

chomotor mechanisms into play. It is the activity of pupils in this age range, the experience of their own identity, their relationships with others, especially with the group and with adults, as well as their interaction with their surrounding environment, which gives structure and unity to reality. It is therefore considered important with this age range, that a personal and social process of building open, interactive knowledge is encouraged, in which the act of acquiring knowledge takes place by means of the re-organisation of the ideas which the child has of the world.

These needs of children aged between 4–8 are, in turn, conditions absolutely essential to the learning process and to their own personal development. It is the authors' understanding that, in this age range, the development of the individual and the learning processes are closely connected, one and the other taking place at the same time, based on small advances, achievements, at times imperceptible, which the teacher can facilitate by observing the child and creating the conditions through rich and varied environmental stimuli. There are no sudden changes, but rather natural processes.

It is considered important, in turn, to analyse the needs or demands most closely related to the curriculum set out for these educational stages.

The curriculum for pupils aged 4–8

The Royal Decrees, further expanding the Spanish Education Act stipulate the core curriculum nationwide for the second pre-primary cycle and primary education.

The Spanish education system has adopted an open curriculum model in which the Ministry of Education establishes the basic aspects and the core curriculum for all stages in the educational process, thus guaranteeing the right of all citizens to basic, quality and equal education. Then, the Autonomous Communities develop, within their remit, their own particular elements of the curriculum, and finally it is the teaching teams who draw up the Curriculum Plan.

The fact that the curriculum is developed at different levels means that it is possible to adapt and organise the elements it contains into learning sequences appropriate to the characteristics, needs and interests of the pupils as a whole in the different stages, cycles and areas, as well to taking into account their cultural and social context.

The drawing up of detailed proposals regarding educational provision in pre-primary and primary education is the responsibility of the teaching staff at individual schools. The decisions concerning the prioritisation of the objectives, the selection and sequencing of the subject matter, the methodological and organisational principles which are adopted and the criteria for evaluating the teaching and learning process must be specifically set out in these proposals. These decisions must be made for each one of the cycles into which the stages are organised.

It is the responsibility of the teams for each cycle and each individual teacher to plan

the specific teaching and learning process for their class or the area of which they are in charge.

The learning objectives are defined in terms of skills which must be developed throughout the pre-primary and primary stages: cognitive, emotional, physical and social skills.

With this age range, particular importance is given to the development of skills related to:

- Acting self-reliantly in everyday activities in personal and school life.
- Constructively establishing affective relationships with peers and adults.
- Contributing to group activities and accepting the rules of peaceful co-existence, which are established through participation.
- Expressing oneself through means of verbal and body language, and also visual, plastic, musical and mathematical forms of expression, paying attention to the expressive intentions and communicative contexts related to the pupils' interests and needs.
- Employing logical and mathematical reasoning to solve simple problems related to everyday living.
- Identifying and formulating questions based on daily life, interaction with the environment in which the pupil lives and using the resources available to provide a creative answer to these questions.
- Knowing and valuing their own bodies and developing healthy daily living habits.
- Creating and enjoying artwork and artistic expression.

The contents on which the teaching and learning process is to be based are, above all, procedures and values, attitudes and rules. The most important are those related to:

- Building a true image of themselves, their self-esteem and their emotions.
- Communication through the use of different means (oral, written, plastic, musical, theatrical, mathematical, audiovisual and virtual).
- Mathematical reasoning, calculation and problem-solving.
- Investigation of the physical, natural and social environment; the practice of respect for and improvement of the environment.
- Interaction with the peer group and with adults which facilitates peaceful and shared co-existence.
- Showing self-reliant, responsible conduct.
- Respecting the rules established through their participation.
- Developing healthy eating and hygiene habits.

As regards the content related to communicating in the different languages, special emphasis should be given to the teaching and learning of reading and writing. This process is carried out throughout this entire age range. However, the formal break between the pre-primary and primary stages, marking the start of compulsory education, means that coordination of projects and planning by the teaching teams responsible for both of these stages is required, in order to give continuity and consistency as regards methodology and teaching methods.

There is yet one further reason for focusing particular attention on this point in the educational process, and that is that there exists a real possibility of integrating children who have not previously attended pre-primary education and who lack the training in the skills which their classmates possess and who need to be provided for according to their needs. The emphasis should be placed on respecting each individual child's individual learning pace rather than bowing to the anxiety shown at times by both the families and the teaching staff to get pupils to read and write as soon as possible.

The Transition from Pre-Primary to Primary stage

Taking into account all of the factors mentioned previously and based on thinking on educational practice, one has the means by which to analyse the transition from the pre-primary to the primary stage. Based on the developmental and curriculum-related needs of pupils aged between 4–8 as a whole, the authors believe it important and necessary to give some serious thought to the following:

1. The search for models which adapt, integrate and coordinate the curriculum requirements of one stage with those of the other. Coordination between the teaching teams of these two stages of education is crucial for facilitating methodological continuity and the individual knowledge of the children involved. Likewise, the support necessary to compensate for the gaps in knowledge and skills of the pupils who access primary education without having previously attended pre-primary education or for those pupils with special educational needs should be considered. A further fundamental consideration is that of establishing a graded sequence of objectives and contents for the learning processes of the final pre-primary cycle and the first primary cycle. It is especially important to thus sequence the objectives in crucial areas such as reading and writing and the development of numerical notions of quantity and problem-solving.
2. Flexible planning as regards the use of space. In the physical area where learning takes place, both group and individual relations are possible, which form the basis of the educational task, according to which different things are learned about oneself, about others and about the world. It is necessary to think about the organisation of the physical space from the point of view of the needs of children aged 4–8: so that it is, for this group in particular, spacious, bright and well-lit, and can be modified according to the activity being carried out. Different arrangements, where the most formal activities take place alongside play, where the classroom library is not incompatible with the experimenting or symbolic game area should be considered. Shared spaces, where several groups can interact, allowing families, other community members and agents to participate should be provided. Open air areas (playgrounds) with differing characteristics, fixed games, slides, tunnels, swings, mazes, etc; free play, balls, buckets and spades, etc.; sandy, grassy and water areas. It is also important to facilitate the transition from one stage to another by familiarizing the pre-primary pupils with the new environment, its new facilities: classrooms, restrooms, dining rooms, playgrounds, etc. Good practice in

some schools is a tour organised for the pre-primary children, on completion of their final pre-primary course, where they are accompanied by their teachers. And when the younger children start primary school, that the older pupils act as mentors, welcoming them when they move up, showing them the facilities and accompanying them during the first breaks, etc.

3. Consideration should be given to the «time» dimension from the perspective of pupils' developmental and curriculum-related needs. In recent years, there has been a trend towards considerably lengthening the school day, in order to cater for the needs of adults. Schools, in their endeavour to educate and build knowledge, must plan and organise their timetables according to the needs and interests of the pupils. Therefore, the authors feel it is necessary to tailor the classroom time according to the type of activity involved, rather than to the different subjects. Some innovative proposals aim to allocate time to both individual and group work, for holding sessions which allow the pupils to participate in their learning process and to include play and relaxation periods. It should also be taken into account when preparing the teachers' schedules that it would be beneficial for each group of pupils in the first cycle to have a limited number of specialist teachers and for these teachers to carry out their teaching activity as coherently as possible as regards methodology and rules.
4. Consideration given to teaching materials. The teaching materials are essential to the learning and teaching process and should serve to achieve the educational objectives. Nevertheless, priority is often given to using certain materials rather than to the objectives originally set. Hence, it is then necessary to adapt the materials to the age and make-up of each group. For the age range concerned, teaching materials should be characterised by: encouraging, exploring and investigating, developing individual and group initiatives; variation according to objectives and contents of the tasks and compliance with the safety regulations as required by law.
5. Attention given to the participation of the families at the time of change from one stage to another. The school provides the formal and informal mechanisms so that families can take part. Children aged 4–8 years are still highly dependent on adults, both their family members and their teachers being role models. Therefore, it is necessary for the criteria governing their conduct to be similar. Likewise, it is considered important for the pupils to visit the facilities and for their families to do so as well. Initiatives are currently being considered, which aim to promote informative and participatory meetings, in order to put minds at rest as regards the transition from one stage to another. If families feel re-assured, then pupils will more easily integrate into the new stage feeling secure and enthusiastic about moving ahead and growing.
6. Encouraging continuous assessment. Improvement in educational practice involves evaluation of the teaching and learning processes. Regular evaluation, analysis of the results, suggesting improvements, together with gathering and studying information and data on the achievements and problems faced can all improve the assistance given to pupils.

7. Taking the diversity of the pupil group into account in the change from one stage to another. All children are different; each one, in their own unique way, has their own development, pace and needs. Knowing the pupil is essential in helping him/her to grow, learn and develop. The educator's job is to develop each child's potential; planning the work, setting objectives, suggesting activities and assessment should all be done taking into account the diversity of each and every child, which involves giving thought to the conditions which make this possible: ratios adapted to the situation, varied material, sufficient professional training and the contribution to be made by professional specialists.

These are some of the factors the authors consider important in dealing with this subject. Many children who have achieved the objectives typical of pre-primary education, find themselves faced with serious problems when trying to meet the challenges of a new stage of schooling at the beginning of primary school. In analysing this situation, an overall perspective is required which does not blame the pupils. Therefore, this article has tried to offer a notion of transition based on a system-wide, overall perspective covering different spheres of the education system.

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