

# Editorial

The number 77 million has often been emphasised in the mid-term progress reports on Education For All goals. As we pass the halfway point between the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and the year – 2015 – by when all children are supposed to have free primary education, 77 million is how many of the world's children are still not in school.

But this emphasis risks distracting us from a fundamental concern: if those 77 million children could be made to attend school for five years, how many would nonetheless still be functionally illiterate at the end of it? It has become increasingly clear since 2000 that the goal of universal primary education may not be as meaningful as originally assumed: when primary education is not of adequate quality, to make it universal is not only pointless but a waste of money.

The question of quality as children make the transition from their homes to primary education therefore runs through this edition of *Early Childhood Matters*.

We believe that a more significant number is 800 million – that's the approximate number of the world's adults who are not functionally literate. Why? Because many of those illiterate adults are the mothers of young children. They include many of the 77 million who aren't in school, and also many of the much larger number of young children – around 200 million – who may be in school but whose overall development is still assessed as being seriously at risk.

Even when at-risk children do get a free place at primary school, they are held back if they have not been exposed to literacy in the home in early childhood. The extent to which children benefit from education depends greatly on how engaged and supportive their parents are, and that intergenerational support is more likely to be lacking when parents do not themselves have a basic education – it is harder to expect parents to support

the development of literacy in their children when they are not themselves literate. Work with parents is therefore a recurring theme in this edition of *Early Childhood Matters*.

Another key message of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's Transitions programme is, of course, that one of the very best ways to ensure that primary schooling isn't a waste of children's time and public money is to invest in quality early childhood programmes.

We are happy to observe that this point is increasingly widely acknowledged. But we are continually frustrated that it is still very little reflected where it really counts – in terms of money going into early childhood education. Although the Education For All Global Monitoring Report last year was on the subject of early childhood, there is relatively little attention paid to it in this year's mid-term stocktaking report. More importantly, when you look at the money being channelled through the Fast Track Initiative – showing which developing-country plans are getting priority funding from the donor community – you find relatively little attention to pre-school programmes.

This edition of *Early Childhood Matters* seeks to focus attention on how quality early childhood programmes can lay the foundations for quality primary education. The first article, by María Victoria Peralta, presents an overview of the complex topic of 'quality' in early childhood education: "the central problem is how to re-conceptualise educational quality taking into account diversity, subjectivity, the various views of the agents involved and the wide range of spatial and temporal contexts, without losing sight of the factors that guarantee a good educational experience" (p. 3).

Next we present an interview with Rosa María Torres, a specialist in basic education for children, young people and adults, in which she highlights the importance of "fully respecting the right to education, which implies the right to equal learning

opportunities for all, the right to learn and to learn how to learn, as an interesting and pleasurable activity, without ill-treatment, with affection, using the time, languages and methods required in each case” (p. 13).

While central to poverty reduction in the developing world, the quality of early childhood care and education is also becoming increasingly significant in developed countries as they reach a point where the majority of young children are being cared for outside the home. This is the question explored in depth by UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre’s Report Card 8, which suggests benchmarks for measuring the quality of early childhood education and care services in the OECD countries.

*Early Childhood Matters* talks to Eva Jespersen, Chief of Monitoring of Social and Economic Policies at Innocenti, about how she hopes the publication of the Report Card will help to shape the political agenda around early childhood issues (p. 20). We then summarise the main findings of the Report Card on p. 22.

To go into greater depth with an example from a developed country, we look at how the provision of early childhood has evolved over time in United Kingdom and the direction in which quality improvement efforts have developed (p. 25).

We then turn our attention involving parents in early childhood programmes as a prerequisite for a quality intervention in early education, especially for children and families who are normally left out of the system. Our first example here comes from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step is developing a project through a parent–school partnership with the aim of supporting success for Roma children (p. 31).

Using a similar strategy of building bridges between families and school, the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú is carrying out a project with indigenous communities in the Peru Amazon rainforest (p. 35). It seeks to increase enrolment and retention of children in early childhood education and primary school by improving both children’s capacities and quality of provision. Also on the theme of harnessing local solutions, the Monduli

Pastoralist Development Initiative is working to improve the quality of young Maasai children’s early care and education in Tanzania by taking the culture and knowledge of the Maasai people as an entry point (p. 39).

To improve quality in early childhood education is an especially challenging objective when financial resources are scarce to non-existent. In the following article (p. 44), Christina Peeters shares some practical ideas about how this can be attempted. Sharing ideas is also a focus of the penultimate article, which looks at how the impact of interventions can be multiplied by knowledge gathering and dissemination and policy advocacy (p. 47). The project carried out by the Organization of American States in Latin America is an example of how the foundation seeks to build alliances that are capable of bringing about positive changes for children.

The process of learning lessons from projects is greatly helped by adequate mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation, which is the topic of our final article (p. 49) – a look at the participatory qualitative methodology developed by the Popular Centre for Culture and Development, in which 12 project quality indicators are systematically applied by educators in their daily work.

It is not always easy to devise ways of measuring the quality of care and education for young children. The foundation will continue to seek ways of doing so at a project level while hoping that Report Card 8 will stimulate more ambition to make comparisons at a national level. But it is also important to keep firmly in mind that behind the benchmarks and statistics are children with rights and needs. Quality in care and education is important because it helps all children – especially those with low-income, minority or under-educated parents – to reach their potential, laying the long-term foundations for more productive and harmonious societies.

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