

Early childhood education in Latin America

Working towards quality and equity

Dr. Gaby Fujimoto, Senior Education Specialist, Organization of American States

The objective of access to primary education for all in Latin America remains to be achieved, with the figure standing at 95 percent in 2005 (UNESCO, 2008). Despite the efforts invested over recent decades, the main group of young children (aged between 0 and 8 years) who lack provision, quality, equity, relevance and efficiency of comprehensive educational, healthcare and social welfare services are those living in indigenous, rural and border villages.

The will to change this situation is the principal reason behind the project 'Trends in transition policies in rural, indigenous and border communities', set up in 2007. The project is being developed by the Organization of American States (OAS) and by partner organisations of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela, and the Central University of Chile.

The project places special emphasis on intervention in education and early childhood care, and is intended to complement the member States' efforts to design, improve, monitor and evaluate policies and strategies aimed at increasing provision of education and improving the quality and equity of education, care and development of children up to the age of 8 years. The aim is to improve the transition from the home into early childhood education (pre-school or nursery) and then into primary education.

The first few months of the project focused on collecting and consolidating existing information in participating countries. It is anticipated that this will lead to a process of multi-sector analysis and assessment of regional policy and early childhood education trends.

The basic questions on which the research is focused are:

- What is the trend for early childhood policy formation, in terms of the transitions selected and within the focus groups studied?
- What conditions in which the respective transitions take place might impact on strengthening quality education in the focus groups studied?

The results obtained from this analysis and the activities aimed at building institutional capacity in the area of early childhood and primary education are shared in a virtual observatory on transitions and quality of education provision for small children¹. It is hoped that other countries will use the information to promote and implement transition policies.

Initial data: the overall situation

In June 2007, the five participating countries held their first meeting in Santiago de Chile and were joined by representatives from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Department of Education and Culture of the OAS.

At the event, the participants reviewed the information gathered from the study countries on the general situation regarding the care of young children and the context of transition policies. Some countries had more information available than others. The participants found most problems in accessing information on itinerant groups and younger age children (0 to 3 years), highlighting the need to cross-reference information and, in some cases, undertake specific studies. Common indicators were population size and the levels of provision of early

childhood education (focused mainly on ages 3 to 6 years), primary education and poverty. However, indicators relating to transition processes were not easily obtainable, with the most common ones (linked to inadequate transition) being rates of school dropout and repetition.

Some general conclusions drawn:

- Early childhood education provision is unable to cover potential demand; e.g., in Colombia in 2003, only 35 percent of children aged less than 5 years attended some kind of educational institution.
- Provision is greater in older age groups; e.g. in Peru there is provision for 4.3 percent of children aged between 0 and 2 years, 41.5 percent of 3-year-olds, 66 percent of 4-year-olds and 61 percent of 5-year-olds. In Venezuela, there is provision for 94 percent of children aged between 7 and 8 years, 85 percent for children between 4 and 6 years and only 21 percent for those aged less than 3 years.
- Provision in rural areas is lower than in urban areas; e.g., in Peru the figure is 45 percent in rural and 66 percent in urban areas.
- Provision in poor sectors is lower than in sectors where income is higher.
- The indigenous population has a higher poverty rate than the mixed-race or white population. This sector also has lower school attendance and a lower educational level than is laid down in Ministry of Education regulations;
- Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela have specific fairness policies that address the rural and indigenous population.

Following the meeting, the project teams prepared an initial report on the project findings, progress and the need to link to quality policies and this was presented at the 5th Meeting of the Education Ministers from the OAS Member States, held at the end of 2007 in Cartagena, Colombia.

The political impact factor

The project brings together a range of committed and qualified people who can work together to attract the political will needed to place early childhood care and education at the top of the political agenda. The 5th Meeting of the Education Ministers was one of several meetings that have

already been held. As a result of the event, the Ministers adopted a formal 'Hemispheric Commitment to Early Childhood Education', in which they agreed to work together with other sectors, international organisations and civil society to achieve several objectives, including in the long-term, the universalisation of early childhood care and education.

This commitment provided a basis for drawing up the Inter-American Committee on Education (CIE) 2007–2009 Work Plan. The CIE represents ministries and ensures implementation of decisions taken at Education Ministers' and Summit of the Americas meetings.

In conclusion

Early childhood education is coming to the fore in the formation of social and education policy in Latin American countries. Children aged between 3 and 6 years are gradually getting better access to early childhood education through a range of formal and non-formal programmes. However, current processes of social and economic change, such as increasing migration and marginalisation of certain sectors of the population, are impeding progress in many countries. There is a danger that these changes, instead of enhancing the role of early childhood education, will accentuate the inequality gap. There is a need for greater attention to equity of access through valuing different cultures and taking account of issues such as identity, sense of belonging and use of local resources.

The current project can make a significant contribution to advancing the quality and fairness of care for the region's most vulnerable children. From this can emerge new policies, better programmes and better theoretical and practical knowledge of the subject. This can lead to improved child development and a better transition through the school system; a core purpose aspired to by all countries in the region.

Note

1 <http://observatoriotrancionesinfancia.org>

References

UNESCO 2008. *Education For All 2008 Monitoring Report*. Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.