

# *“We must learn to use the transitions in children’s lives far more positively”*

## *An interview with John Bennett*

*John Bennett has coordinated the Starting Strong reviews by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of early childhood care and education over the past years. He now works as a freelance consultant. Here he talks to Early Childhood Matters about the Starting Strong reviews, with particular reference to transitions between home, pre-school and school.*

*ECM: You’ve spent much of the last decade looking at how early childhood education and care are handled in a number of OECD countries. To begin with, talk us through how that came about.*

John Bennett: *Starting Strong* grew out of the OECD’s work on lifelong learning in the mid-1990s, which identified early childhood education and care (ECEC) as the foundation stage of lifelong learning. As a result, we were authorised by the OECD’s education committee in 1997 to invite countries to undertake comprehensive reviews of their policies, aided by OECD expert teams. We felt it was important to specify ‘care’ as well as education – a false distinction, in my view, but a common one – so that we were able to include services for the youngest children in all the countries we studied.

The first *Starting Strong* report was published in 2001 and covered 12 countries – 10 in Europe plus the USA and Australia. *Starting Strong II*, which was published in September 2006, looks at what has changed in those countries in the last five years, and also studies eight further OECD countries. It has been a major undertaking.

*How did the countries you studied react to the publication of the first Starting Strong report in 2001? Has it led to any changes?*

The reaction on the whole was very positive. Most countries welcomed an external evaluation of their

systems, and the report focussed more attention on policy and on the structuring of ECEC systems. It started a number of conversations about issues such as creating more coherent national ECEC systems, as in the Nordic countries, which have brought together ‘child care’ and ‘early education’ into seamless, integrated universal systems. In these countries, ECEC has become a cornerstone of progressive labour and education policies, and a guarantee, not only of a fair start in life for young children, but also of equality of opportunity for women.

At the same time, we also underlined the importance of quality – that is, it’s not enough for governments simply to say, “This year we’ve provided money to create 3,000 more places and next year we’ll create 8,000 more”. Unless these places provide quality education and care for young children, they may actually do more harm than good. In other words, serious government investment in and a rigorous regulation of early childhood services are necessary. We also tried to clarify issues of the costs and benefits of early childhood care and education in terms that policy-makers and the public could relate to, for example, the economic benefits of freeing up mothers for the labour market, the greater efficiency in education systems that early childhood services can bring, and the right of parents – including fathers – to have time with their children in their early years through access to remunerated parental leave.

*How do the different countries you studied measure up in this regard?*

There tends to be a difference in emphasis between the Nordic countries and other countries, for example, the liberal economies. By and large the Nordic countries take the view that ECEC should not take place in a protected educational stream only but rather in the context of a broader social agenda. Following their example, we emphasised in the contextual chapter in the *Starting Strong* reports that early childhood systems should serve not only the central aim – the care, upbringing and education of young children – but should also include broad societal goals, such as social and family welfare (including parental leave); gender equality; civic participation, and the fight against child and family poverty.

Because of the benefits flowing from their ECEC systems, the Nordic countries tend to see ECEC as a public good – that is, that as society as a whole benefits from the investment, it is quite legitimate that public monies should be invested in the sector. We found that this was often a difficult message to get across in the liberal economies, where the wider dimensions of ‘child care’ are overlooked, and there is a tendency to view the care of young children as a private market transaction between parents and childcare providers. These countries tend to ‘target’ public financing only toward the lowest-income children, and often, this gesture makes little sense when countries continue year after year to produce ever greater numbers of families and children held back by poverty, or excluded in some way. It’s wise policy to provide targeted and well-funded programmes but only if similar efforts are being made to reduce family and child poverty upstream, that is, through fiscal, social and labour policies that provide more equity and prevent poverty. The evidence suggests that the challenges of poverty reduction and failure in school run deeper than providing early childhood ‘interventions.’

*Have any unexpected benefits arisen from the Starting Strong work?*

I think that *Starting Strong* work has contributed to the knowledge base of ECEC – not in terms of experimental research, but in making known what

different countries outside the English-speaking sphere are doing. The project has given people a sense that child poverty is not a fatality (as it is sometimes viewed in the English-speaking economies), that high-quality, developmental programmes for the youngest children can be organised as an entitlement for all families, that ECEC staff can be trained to high levels and have decent working conditions and careers in the early childhood field.

Another thing that’s been very encouraging is the building up of ECEC networks within and across countries. The reviews showed that there was often little contact between the different ministries in charge of young children, and for this reason, no common vision or project. We often found that early childhood coordinators in the different ministries were isolated and struggled against a perception that their work was – as the French say – the ‘fifth wheel on the cart’. Working with other ministries and the main stakeholders in the early childhood field has given a greater volume and significance to the work of the administrators. We found that to make progress, you need to have a critical mass of people working together on early childhood within a country – as has taken place in the UK, for example, with the Sure Start initiative.

At the international level, we were able to support a network of ECEC coordinators in the ministries of the countries we studied, who have – since the reviews – been able to meet once or twice a year with each other to examine early childhood policy issues and initiatives. The *Starting Strong* process has played a helpful role in enabling early childhood professionals working at policy-making level to come together and to learn from and with each other and, as a result, to be able to argue their case more strongly.

*As you know, the Bernard van Leer Foundation recently started working in issue areas, one of which is “Successful transitions: The continuum from home to school”. What do you see as the most important issues here?*

Well, I think that the title of your programme is a good one, in that you start with the home. A parent or parents are normally the main emotional anchors



The social pedagogy approach supports children to form a positive self-image as a creative, strong child; to be curious and investigative, and to develop thinking skills and a positive attitude towards learning

and points of reference for a child. If they can be involved in the transitions of their child in a positive way from the beginning, e.g., the transition of their child to the childcare centre, they can also provide the stability and the support that their children may need in later transitions. Parental support to children can be much reinforced by the centre, for example, by centre staff providing advice and information to parents, involving parents in their work, and establishing an atmosphere and ethic that ensure a welcome for every child.

A second direction that the Foundation initiative could give would be to view transitions more positively. Despite the bad press that transitions can be given, we noticed during the *Starting Strong* reviews that transition into school generally had a highly positive connotation for young children. Young children desire to move forward and the challenge of transition can be highly motivating for

them. For this reason, we must see transition not as a problem but a challenge. I think that we must learn to use the transitions in children's lives far more positively, with greater insight into their potential, rather than seeing transitions as problematic for every child.

In terms of smoothing transitions from the early childhood centre to the school – an aspect of transition that the *Starting Strong* review focussed most on – much can be done to reinforce the astounding adaptability of young children. Again parents will have a key role, through talking issues through with their children, and through continuing their contacts with the primary school and the new teachers. In addition, the early education centres and schools must also play their role – by establishing institutional contacts well ahead of time, by bringing the 'graduating' children to visit the school in advance and by establishing or

strengthening contacts between the 'old' and 'new' teachers. The personal element is always critical with young children – in this instance, the continuity of companions and teachers. Children wish to move forward with their closest friend or friends, and this should be catered for as much as possible. Again, continuity of teachers is very reassuring for young children: in Denmark and Sweden for example the early childhood pedagogue or teacher moves forward from the kindergarten into the pre-school class, that is, the special class used in the Nordic countries (except Norway) to bridge the transition into primary school, which normally, in these countries, begins at 7 years.

The creation of this special class by the Nordic countries also points to the importance of institutional arrangements. A pre-school class is reassuring for young children, and makes the switch over to a greater focus on subject-based knowledge and the acquisition of literacy skills easier for children. Both an early childhood pedagogy and primary school approach are used throughout this year, and in Denmark, the class is shared by a kindergarten pedagogue and a teacher from the school.

Other countries do things differently. In countries adopting a pre-primary approach to early education – that is, organising early education not as a kindergarten (with a focus on play, socio-emotional development, and holistic project work) but like a junior school (age cohorts, high child-staff ratios, a focus on cognitive development and learning standards, relatively few parental inputs) – transition into school is normally not a difficulty. The pre-primary approach offers a smooth path from the early childhood classroom to the primary classroom, as the curricula and routines of both are often closely aligned. In France, for example, continuity is ensured through the use of a bridging curriculum across the final year of the *école maternelle* and the first two years of primary school. In addition, teachers can freely – if the school director approves – move upwards with their classes into primary school.

However, one has the impression in this situation that the young children have never really had the experience of an appropriate early childhood pedagogy where they can learn self-regulation

at their own pace and follow their own learning paths. The similarity of the two milieus supports a smooth transition from pre-primary into primary, but not necessarily at a personal level. The wishes and fears of the individual child may not be taken into account in large classrooms focussed not on the individual child or the child's agency but on reaching early learning standards. How often does one come across young children not excited and thrilled by their progression into school, but anxious about whether they will be allowed to 'pass' into school! The situation is not improved in systems where primary school begins at 5 or even 4 years.

*A theme we keep coming back to in this edition of Early Childhood Matters is the question of making schools ready for children. What, in your view, are the challenges primary schools face in making transitions successful?*

Well, *Starting Strong I* made a clear recommendation for successful transitions by positing 'a strong and equal partnership' between the early childhood centre and the school. An equal partnership requires that early childhood pedagogy with its emphasis on the natural learning strategies of the child (play, personal investigation, active learning) should be respected and be reflected in the early classes of the primary school. Continuity in educational processes can be stressed in two ways: through bringing down the sequential educational processes of the primary school into early education, or more appropriately, bringing upwards the holistic and investigative approaches to learning, characteristic of the young child, into the junior classes of the primary school. In other words, schools may need to adapt a modified pedagogy in the first years of primary schooling.

The reality is, however, that the relationship between primary education and the early childhood sector is neither strong nor equal. Schools and early childhood centres tend not to interact with each other sufficiently, although strengthening relationships is perhaps the easier part to tackle – the more serious part of the challenge is making those relationships more equal, because ECEC tends to be viewed as the weaker partner. This needs to change, and the strengths of the early childhood sector recognised, such as the greater skills in involving

parents shown by early childhood personnel. In addition, traditional attitudes holding that 'real' educational work with children starts only in the primary school need to be challenged. The work accomplished in ECEC centres to support the health and well-being of children, their socialisation and early attitudes toward learning is equally valuable, and should be continued upward into school. We need also to introduce more consciously into the lower primary classes pedagogies more typical of the early childhood period, such as learning by doing, project work and group work.

At the same time, the holistic nature of the young child's learning should not be made an excuse to banish sequential learning or emergent literacy and numeracy from the early childhood centre. Young children have a deep desire to communicate and imitate. They take real pleasure from 'play-writing', trying to decode, and many other emergent literacy skills. Again, as with transitions, their pleasure in these activities and their innate drive to communicate and use what Reggio Emilia calls 'the hundred languages of children' needs to be nurtured, and channelled toward emergent literacy, while respecting the child's interests and autonomy. Likewise, young children are happy to know that knowledge acquisition can be sequential, that is, that they have actually made progress and know more this month than last. It's helpful too for early childhood pedagogues to have a good idea of sequential progress, although they will not force children to achieve a pre-specified level of knowledge and proficiency at a given age.

*This brings us on to what you've written about the difference between the 'social pedagogy' approach to ECEC and the 'pre-primary' approach. Can you sketch the main differences between them?*

The 'social pedagogy' approach is, broadly practised in the Nordic countries. Typically children start attending kindergarten from the age of a year to eighteen months, but they do not embark on more formal learning activities and preparation for school in any focussed sense until the age of 6 or 7. Play, group project work and a confidence in the child's natural learning strategies characterise the Nordic kindergarten. The pedagogy employed combines care, nurturing and education, an approach that is

expected to continue into school. There's a strong emphasis on inculcating democratic values and attitudes, such as respect for diversity, helpfulness toward others, and personal responsibility. Where language and literacy are concerned, there is little focus on formal decoding or phonics until the pre-school class (6–7 years) but the use of the '100 languages' (including rich oral expression) is a central part of the pedagogical programme. For example, children in Finland do not begin working on literacy in any formal sense until the age of 6 or 7, but by the age of 14 they lead the world in reading comprehension. By contrast, we have seen children in 'tighter' early education systems who seem to have lost their enthusiasm for reading shortly after they learn to decode – perhaps because they have been confronted with too much drilling too soon. But I say 'perhaps': we do not have enough research on this topic to come to firm conclusions, except that children from the Nordic countries who begin literacy and sequential type learning much later than children in Western Europe do not seem at a disadvantage in the later PISA (age 14) tests.

In the 'pre-primary' approach – which is prevalent in the English-speaking countries and also in France and much of the rest of Europe – early childhood education is seen more narrowly as a training ground for school. Child-to-teacher ratios are higher and formal learning and school-like discipline can begin as early as the age of 3. Because of the numbers involved, there is less opportunity for teachers to respond to individual needs, and perhaps for children to practise autonomy and personal responsibility.

*You clearly favour the social pedagogy approach typified by the Nordic countries. What do you see as its advantages?*

Yes, the Nordic systems seem to me to respect more the well-being and psychological needs of young children. They take a holistic approach to learning. Instead of focusing from a very early age on developing particular skills such as gymnastics, literacy, numeracy, or other skill, they aim for more open and general goals such as social competence, emotional development, meaning-making relevant for young children and participation. To my mind, the UNESCO report, *Learning: The treasure within*,

conducted by Jacques Delors and an international team of experts, sums up admirably what ECEC should be about. It puts forward four main aims of learning: learning to be; *learning to do*; *learning to learn*; and *learning to live together*. This is reflected in the social pedagogy approach – the curriculum supports children to form a positive self-image as a creative, strong child; to be curious and investigative, and to develop thinking skills and a positive attitude towards learning. Social skills and a sense of linkedness with others are also emphasised through group work, often using the language of rights from a very early age.

A problem with the pre-primary approach – at least for me – is that it tends to focus more on the school as the benchmark, rather than on the potential and interest of each child. Pre-schools in some countries have become junior schools focussing on meeting quantifiable learning goals. They are less concerned with encouraging young children to become autonomous and to contribute to their group. The pedagogical model is that of teachers deciding and directing activities and children conforming, whereas in the social pedagogy approach the children tend to choose and be supported in *their* activities. Children play a more active role, and democratic participation is actively encouraged.

*You mean in terms of social capital and participation in democracy?*

Yes, there's some concern at present in countries about apathy towards the democratic process. To my mind, apathy is not surprising when education systems encourage passiveness in children from an early age, and according to research within the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, do not involve children sufficiently in the civic life of the school. At kindergarten level, this is a pity, as young children are at a moment in life where basic attitudes toward others and toward society are being formed. In a well-run kindergarten, a strong focus will be maintained on how children live their lives in the centre, on their well-being and attitudes, and not just on external learning standards. Young children love to participate and to learn through play, personal investigation and freely chosen group work. These aptitudes can be nurtured by appropriate pedagogies and curricula,

which provide young children with opportunities to choose, negotiate and participate. Peter Moss in a recent book also talks about the importance of the ECEC centre as a focal point for democratic participation and decision-making: bringing parents and people from all sectors of a community together with teachers and local authorities to discuss questions about education, and what communities and societies want for their children.

*How can policy-makers help to bring this situation about?*

The line ministries can help people participate by practising consultation as much as possible. The practice corresponds to modern modes of management – to consult, disseminate information and provide funding and education to people to do things for themselves. In public institutions like the early childhood centre or the school, this will mean training directors to involve parents in all aspects of centre management and goal-setting. For example, a good opportunity is offered by new curricula in early childhood, whereby ministries, rather than imposing an expert-driven curriculum from the capital city, consult the major stakeholders across the country about how early childhood services should be conducted and what are their basic aims. In this way, ownership of the general curriculum plan and of centres is given back to the stakeholders, and the task of formulating a more detailed curriculum for each centre is entrusted to the teachers, parents and children involved. But this presupposes adequate training of teachers to take on this task and to involve parents at a deep level. Again the Nordic countries tend to be more advanced in this field than elsewhere in Europe, but interesting initiatives are also taking place in other parts of Europe. The US also tends to be strong in involving parents in the early childhood sector, and the laws in many states make this a requirement for publicly-funded programmes.

*Finally, the OECD reviews you've coordinated have obviously dealt only with wealthier, more developed countries. Can you identify any lessons from this which developing countries should also bear in mind?*

I'm not a great one for lessons, especially when one is dealing with the majority world. There are enough

insightful people in these countries to lead their own early childhood systems. All I would say is that if developing countries wish to use models from the developed world, it is good to choose models, based on respect for parents, social equity and appropriate pedagogies. It saddens me to see countries adopting pre-primary approaches emphasising 'readiness for school', rather than more egalitarian models focussing on the well-being and general development of young children, in association with their parents and communities.

Early childhood and primary school sectors in developing countries still follow many of the oppressive (for children) features of the older colonial models: competitive, elitist, narrowly 'educational' and divorced from the needs of the poorest children and communities. When the model is adopted to cater for large numbers, the situation of children can further deteriorate: impossible numbers of children per teacher, few materials and teaching resources, long distances to travel for many children. But the Foundation has much greater experience of these matters, and I'm sure, well-informed ideas about how to provide education using local community strengths in co-operation with the education authorities.