

Guest Editor's Note:

Pre-primary education: Why so important?

Jamie Wallin, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, and
Visiting Professor, Rangsit University (Thailand)

E-mail: rsu.wallin@yahoo.ca

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More than 85% of brain development in very young children is already nearly in place. These early years “provide a crucial window of opportunity for girls and boys to build the foundations of learning and develop skills that can help them succeed in school and in the course of their lives” (UNICEF, 2019, p. 4). Yet, about half of pre-primary age children world-wide are NOT enrolled in pre-primary education.

April 8, 2020, will see the launching of the UNESCO's 2020 Global Monitoring Report, also referred to as 'GEM'. For many years now UNESCO has been tracking the progress being made by member nations towards improving their educational systems. One of the areas that is monitored on a regular basis is *Inclusion*.

The term 'Inclusion' refers to access, that is, which children and how many, are excluded from an education because of background (race, religion) or ability. An agreement was reached a few years ago by the UNESCO's member nations at their 2015 meeting in Incheon (S. Korea), that 'no matter what argument may be built to the contrary, we have a moral imperative to ensure *every* child has a right to an appropriate education of high quality' (UNESCO, 2020, p. 1).

Appropriate is one of the key words. According to UNICEF, more than 175 million children – around half of pre-primary-age children world-wide were **NOT** enrolled in pre-primary education. Research evidence shows that it is in **children's early years** that the foundations for learning are being set. This period is **prior to their entering primary school**. (UNICEF, 2019, p. 6).

Children who do not have pre-school educational experiences will be severely disadvantaged when they begin formal schooling. UNICEF's Executive Director, recently stated, “Pre-primary schooling is our children's educational foundation – every stage of education that follows relies on its success” (UNICEF, 2020, p. 1).

The situation in low-income countries is even more serious: only 1 in 5 children are enrolled in pre-primary education. But, why is this so important?

If children are enrolled in at least one year of pre-primary education they are “more likely to develop the critical skills they need to succeed in school, less likely to repeat grades or drop out of school, and therefore more able to contribute to peaceful and prosperous societies and economies when they reach adulthood” (UNICEF, 2019, p.4). The evidence is clear: in countries where more children attend pre-primary programmes, significantly more children complete primary school and attain minimum competencies in both reading and math by the time they finish primary school.

UNICEF United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

The UNICEF report notes that household wealth, mothers' education level and geographic location are among the main determinants for pre-primary attendance. But, poverty is the single largest determining factor. (2020, p. 2)

Poverty. Poverty, of course, is a major deterrent. Children from the richest families are 7 times more likely to attend an early childhood educational programme, according to UNICEF's findings. Among the poorest families are those who are marginalised. They include indigenous people, minority religious and ethnic groups, those who live in rural areas, and children with disabilities. (UNICEF, 2019, p. 40)

Even where preschools do exist, parents may not send their children because the language used is not their own language. Marginalised ethnic groups, for example, tend to have little or no political power to persuade local or state governments to provide preschool programmes for their children. And, families living in extreme poverty face additional challenges such as lower access to health services, good nutrition and clean water. These factors will also affect attendance.

The United Nations data base for 2010-2016 reveals the percentage of 3- and 4-year old children who are attending early childhood educational programmes in selected countries. What follows is a look at what the data base reveals with respect to five countries located in Southeast Asia.

Thailand and Vietnam. In Thailand, there is little difference between the children of the poorest and the richest families. **Both** have high levels of attendance, 80-85 %. That figure is the same for Vietnam's wealthiest families, about 85%. However, the attendance rate among the poor is much lower: about 55%.

Laos and Myanmar. In Laos the disparity in attendance rates is large. Among the poor only 3-4%; however, for richer families the level is about 75%. Only 10-12% of children of poor families in Myanmar attend pre-primary programmes, compared with 45% of children from richer families.

Cambodia. Young children in Cambodia are the most severely disadvantaged. Only 3% of children from poor families and only 38-40% from wealthy families are enrolled in preprimary education. (UNICEF, 2019, p. 43)

Educational level of the mother and location. Maternal education level is strongly linked to attendance in a pre-school programme. Across countries where data exists, children whose mothers have completed secondary education or higher are more than five times more likely to be enrolled in a preschool programme than children of mothers with only primary education or no formal education.

Other children miss out on early childhood education because they live in rural areas. Again the data is clear: across 60 countries included in the UNICEF analysis, children living in rural areas are 2.5 times less likely to attend than children living in urban areas. The difference is even wider when considering only low income countries. (UNICEF, 2019, p. 42)

Concluding comment. The adolescents ten years hence are now in their early childhood years. They have not yet entered primary school. Their brain development is already nearly in place. They are ready to learn. Those who will have access to an early childhood education programme **for at least one year** will be better prepared for the transition to primary school. They will be less likely to repeat grades or drop out of school when they reach the end of compulsory schooling.

It was reported that in 2017 only 6.6% of domestic education budgets globally were dedicated to pre-primary education, with nearly 40 per cent of countries with data allocating less than 2 per cent of their

education budgets to this sub-sector. However, across Europe and Central Asia, governments dedicate more than 11 per cent of their education budgets to pre-primary education. (UNICEF, 2020, p. 2))

Both international organisations, UNESCO and UNICEF stress the importance of governments around the world ensuring that today's preschoolers start school at the right time, take all necessary steps to discourage dropouts, and that children acquire the skills they will need to deal with an increasingly uncertain and rapidly changing future.

Finally, considering the benefits to national economies, quality pre-primary education also supports economic growth. Also, when children are participating in pre-primary education, their mothers and other caregivers are thus able to have part-time jobs and increase their earnings, and thereby lift up their standard of living. In the long term, pre-primary education can improve the well-being of a country by "enhancing labour force productivity and reducing the social costs of crime and health care" (UNICEF, 2019, p, 11).

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