

Quality and equity in learnings: Starting at the beginning?

This article proposes a discussion around quality and equity in education since the beginning of school experience, a key aspect but unattended. It also presents some findings of an investigation showing how early childhood school influence boys and girls to have a positive learning experience in basic education.

During the last years, there has been an emphasis in improving quality in learnings in general terms. However, and paradoxically, many processes and important specific experiences are left behind for the sake of the general discussion. In this article, I propose that the discussion around quality and equity needs to become a reality in specific processes necessary to attend. One of those processes has to do with the beginning of the school experience for thousands of students, a key aspect but unattended. To show this, here are some results from a recent research I conducted under the framework of the project Children of the Millennium.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BEGINNING: STARTING SCHOOL

It is necessary to point out that an increasing number of international publications have mentioned the importance of early childhood experience during the first years of Primary as fundamental to achieve results in the following school years, which makes this period much more significant than any other (Woodhead y Moss, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Johansson, 2002; Dunlop y Fabian, 2002; Margetts, 2000). More specifically, transition to first grade seems to be the key in this process, because students who adjust better to first grade tend to show better performance in the following years comparing with the ones who did not adjust well. There is also evidence that shows that boys and girls who have access to Pre-primary education have more possibilities to experience a successful transition to first grade

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(Margetts, 1999; Rodrigues, 2000; Le Roux, 2002; Save the Children, 2007). The word transition here “[...]” refers to a changing process experienced when children and their families move from one space to another. For example, when a child moves from his house to kindergarten or to kindergarten to first grade” (Dunlop y Fabian, 2002: 3).

Although the discussion around transitions in early childhood is relatively scarce in the region and in the country, it is an issue of great relevance in our context. In Peru, in 1992, 24% of first grade students fail, while 10% dropped out; these figures were higher than for other primary grades. This led the Ministry of Education (MIN-EDU) to ban repetition in this grade and to introduce automatic promotion in 1995. Repetition rates have decreased up to 5%. However, there have not been evaluations on how this measure impacted the experiences of boys and girls in first grade, nor whether quality in education in this grade has improved or not. Furthermore: repetition rates in second and third grade went up slightly in the following years (Guadalupe *et al.*, 2002), showing that this measure has merely postponed the problem rather than solved it.

THE STUDY

With this background and the interest to know the transition processes and the school beginning better, a qualitative research on the transition of first grade with a group of 28 boys and girls, their fathers and mothers, and their teachers, in four different district of the country was made during 2007 and 2008. This research is part of the project Children of the Millennium.¹ The boys and girls participants were 5 or 6 years old when we made our first visit. Almost the half was in kindergarten and the other half in first grade. Two girls did not attend neither of the levels.

The research questioned: (i) how prepared are the schools and the teachers to facilitate transition to first grade?; (ii) how much information do parents have on the process and what were their perspectives?; and, (iii) how do children live this transition?

¹ The Children of the Millennium is a longitudinal study along 15 years about infant poverty in India (the state of Andhra Pradesh), Ethiopia, Peru and Vietnam. Two groups of children are studied in each country: a group of approximately two thousand children born between 2000 and 2001 (the youngest) and the other group with almost a thousand children born between 1994 and 1995 (the oldest). Both groups were studied for the first time using surveys in 2002 and later in 2006/2007, with a follow up during 2009 and continue collecting information till 2015.

When observing the institutional level, we found good news: increasing enrolment in Pre-primary, which can help the beginning of primary and better availability and access to educational services in urban and rural areas. However, hidden fees (uniforms, materials, parents association fees, food, etc) still hinder universal access to kindergarten school, and there are more enrolment in urban areas (89%) than in rural ones (73%²), meaning persistence of inequity in the access to educational services.

Even worst is what we have found in the schools. Watching the institutional arrangements and the present practices in concrete teachers, we can say that transition from kindergarten to first grade is not understood as a process within and between schools. This is evident in the weak (if it exists) coordination and dialogue between Pre-primary and Primary school teachers; in the physical and administrative separation between the levels that keeps them as if in distant worlds (although they are just a couple of blocks away); in the lack of continuity among the different areas of the classroom, physically (for example, the learning corners) and culturally (child centred approach vs. teacher centred approach); in the inexistence of plans or programmes that focus on children without Pre-primary experience; and the lack of specialized training to teach Primary school teachers how to work in the first grade, so that they can promote successful transitions (being the latter an expressed recommendation of the National Educational Project).

Schools are not making any conscious effort to welcome students to their classrooms and lighten the changes they will face. On the contrary, they put most of the heavy burden of adjustment on the shoulders of the children with little organised support. Teachers point out the importance of the role of parents in this adjustment, but offer little or no information and guidance to the parents to comply their role. The exchange and communication between parents and teachers are very general focusing on discipline, general performance and specific school or class material needs.

On the other hand, we found that parents generally have a positive attitude towards education and there is an increasing consensus regarding the importance of Pre-primary education as a preliminary and necessary step to prepare students for the school experience.

² Figures on the total of *The Children of the Millennium* (2 000 children; see Escobal *et al.*, 2008 for more details).



Parents not only recognise that their children acquire new skills in kindergarten (such as letters and numbers) but also social skills and behaviour. Most children have been in kindergartens, although their experiences vary regarding duration. Hidden costs can play a role against a longer enrolment. Besides, the fact that the State does not provide the necessary educational materials to work in Pre-primary education makes it dependent on the parents' contributions and their ability to provide materials to the schools. Therefore, poor families end up receiving the poorest educational services because they cannot afford them sufficiently.

Beyond the usefulness that Pre-primary offers and that most recognise, parents have little information on the transitions and the importance of this particular transition in first grade, and on ways in which they can help. Only mothers with higher education level in Lima (three) were able to identify this moment as important, and no schools or teachers seem to offer specific information on the matter.

After observing the scarce institutional support and limited information parents have in general, we found that, in this context, the heavy burden of adjustment to Primary school is on the children: they are the ones who have to go through the transition and make sense of it with little orientation or help. However, they show a positive attitude towards transition and diverse skills to

overcome it. Moreover, they clearly identify the differences between the characteristics in kindergarten and primary school, from the teachers to the spaces, from the activities to the educational approaches. Children see this step towards Primary education as an opportunity to learn and, indeed, feel they are growing. However, although this positive attitude, this transition is not necessarily easy for them and implies a great deal of stress, specially at facing certain kinds of violence such as other children's bullying, beats or physical punishment at school and at home. These practices have been widely criticised but the fact is that they still exist and demand a better strategy to enhance these early childhood experiences, especially at the beginning of school.


The study also revealed other aspect that needs attention: intercultural bilingual education for children with a different mother tongue from Spanish, which is particularly relevant at the beginning of school, as the case of Ana shows.

Ana was 5 years old when we met her in 2007; she lived in a Quechua peasant's community of the province of Andahuaylas. She attended kindergarten school but her mother was concerned because children were forced to learn Spanish, and children knew "but only in Quechua". The following year, these worries were confirmed, for Ana had many problems adjusting to Primary school.

In the school, the teaching language was also Spanish, although teachers sometimes spoke Quechua because children did not understand. The peasants' children in Ana's school should leave their *ojotas* (traditional shoes) at the classroom door, and are asked not to come with traditional clothes such as the *chumpi* or the traditional blanket of the area. In general, Ana likes school but not when the teacher "whips classmates" who make mistakes.

Ana is just one of the thousand of indigenous children in Peru whose first contact with school tells them that it does not recognise their identity, language or rights (such as receiving education in their own language or respecting their physical integrity). Felipe, Ana's classmate, is used to playing and moving around the fields, where he goes with his mother to shepherd cattle, and in the garden, where swings are his favorite, does not feel at ease at school and runs away

every time he can. His mother makes him go, but that does not solve the problems Felipe finds in his school: absence of games and learning stimuli, use of a language he hardly handles at his 6 years old, physical punishment to correct a mistake and devaluation of his own identity and culture.

Talking about quality and equity supposes taking into consideration all the factors referred here, but not as abstract notions but having in mind the moments and the particular processes boys and girls face along their school lives. The beginning of school deserves, as a result, much more attention from the decision makers and educators, so they can make the most of the parents and the children's positive attitudes.³ 

³ See Ames, Rojas y Portugal (2009) for a longer version of the study this article is based on.

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