

Early Years Foundations for Effective Primary Education

Ms. Catherine Young (SIL International - LEAD Asia)

The goals of Education for All (EFA) are centrally concerned with access and equity. Although many countries in Asia are making significant progress in meeting EFA targets, the challenge remains of expanding access to quality basic education to include marginalised groups, particularly learners excluded through ethno-linguistic identity.

There is a risk of widening disparities between those in the mainstream of traditional educational delivery and those who are marginalised. If they are excluded, are denied rights, and prevented from developing their potential, there will be challenges in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

When children begin their education in an unfamiliar language, they spend much of their early schooling attempting to understand the language of the classroom, rather than engaging with the subjects being taught. This early discouraging experience leads to low self-esteem and negative attitudes towards formal education. As children drop out of school at a young age, they do not attain the formal qualifications increasingly necessary to enter the job market, particularly as national and regional market economies overtake local informal economic systems. Limited employment opportunities contribute to cycles of generational poverty. This cycle of disaffection with formal education impacts the parents of successive generations who view education as irrelevant to their needs and the needs of their children.

There is a tendency to consider pre-primary education as “preparation for formal schooling” rather than a critical component of children’s education, contributing to the child’s development. But the child’s early experiences set a foundation for future cognitive and academic development. The early years of schooling establish attitudes towards formal education that impact retention of learners in the school system. Positive pre-school experiences will facilitate smooth integration into formal primary education.

Four principles of early years education support effective early years education for all children – particularly children from minority ethnolinguistic communities.

Building on what is known: Put simply, the curriculum must be prepared in a sequential manner, helping the child move from the known to the unknown. Those involved in curriculum should know the context of the learners and their world. Using thematic approaches from ideas within a child’s culture provides a bridge from that culture and knowledge to others the child will encounter, including in maths education. Using thematic approaches, such as introducing a new theme every week around ideas and concepts from the child’s culture, emphasises the value of that culture and provides a bridge to other cultures.

Encouraging multisensory experiences: Effective pedagogy for young learners should provide children with opportunities to play, learn and make choices, without experiencing a sense of failure. An effective curriculum values the multiple senses, including listening, speaking, tasting, touching, and smelling, as part of strategies for learning.

Emphasising social learning; When children learn through talking and thinking together as peers, this can create confidence and trust, increasing learning and reinforcing and supporting social and ethnic identity.

Valuing language as the basis for critical thinking and problem solving: this means using alternative classroom methodologies like dialog, story-telling, self-expression and problem-solving.

Finally, community involvement in curriculum development is vital: it promotes local ownership, reinforces links between home and school, and sets the foundations for sustainability.