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**Preschool Education  
in Latin America:  
Estate of the practice**

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Over the past fifteen years, Latin America has devoted increasing attention to preschool programs. This area of education has grown faster than any other, both in the region as a whole and in most of the individual countries there. Change has touched not only formal and nonformal preschool programs but also child care and development activities with an educational component. Since this part of the education sector is still in its infancy, however, a review of the present “state of the practice” seems in order to provide a sound basis for future policy and action. To that end, this discussion examines (1) the scientific and social arguments in support of expanding early education and development activities, (2) the advantages and disadvantages of existing programs, (3) some of the main problems that will have to be resolved as the field grows, and (4) some suggestions for action.

## **PRESCHOOL EDUCATION, LEARNING, AND DEVELOPMENT**

Twenty-five years ago, the term “preschool education” was fairly straightforward, albeit narrow, in meaning. Throughout Latin America it referred to formal programs in school-like settings outside the home for children in their immediate preschool years. Most people pictured it as a group of about 25 children, ages 4 and 5, sitting around small tables drawing or fitting colored triangles into a puzzle board, supervised by a professional teacher. Programs providing education or fostering social development of children prior to age four were classified as “child care” and treated separately. Organized community-based and non-formal programs of early childhood education and development were not common and those efforts that did occur were not included in statistics on preschool education.

Times have certainly changed since then. Preschool education now encompasses learning programs for children anywhere from birth to seven years of age. In addition, these programs may take place in a wide range of formal and

nonformal settings (see Box 1), and they may take various forms:

- Formal, conventional preschool programs run or sanctioned by the government.
- Nonformal programs, sometimes run by the government, but also operated by nongovernmental organizations and communities.
- Integrated child care and development programs that include an education or psychosocial development component. Some of these programs are operated outside the education sector, for instance, as part of the social security system, but receive technical support from education. The responsible organization may be a government agency, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), or a community organization.
- Parental or adult education programs that teach adults to be better “first teachers” of their children at home.

Although all these changes are encouraging, they have made the task of organizing and delivering preschool programs more complicated. Indeed, describing the “state of the practice” in initial and preschool education is no longer a simple matter for even the basic assumptions have been modified.

## **WHY INVEST IN EARLY EDUCATION?**

Twenty-five years ago, not everyone believed in the value of early interventions, so a great deal of time had to be spent in justifying the investment. Moreover, early upbringing, including education, was thought to be the exclusive province of families and not an area for government involvement. Today, people seem somewhat less skeptical about investing in early education, perhaps because of the growing body of knowledge about the value of such efforts and because of new demands related to changing economic, social, demographic, political, and educational conditions and ways of thinking in the region. These same changes have forced governments to become involved in early learning and to support (but not replace) families in the process of fostering such learning.

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## BOX 1

### THE SHIFTING DEFINITION OF “PRESCHOOL EDUCATION”

Extending the age limits. Peru's educational reform of 1972 introduced a new term into the preschool field -"initial education"- and with it the idea of expanding preschooling to the education of children from birth until entry into school. This concept and the term itself have been adopted by several countries in the region. Some, however, use the term "preschool education" or parvularia to cover this period, while others restrict "initial education" to the period from birth to three years and "preschooling" to the immediate years prior to primary schooling. Perhaps the most significant point about all these changes is that the official responsibility of ministries of education in most of the region now begins at birth rather than at age three or four.

The growth of nonformal programs. In the 1970s and 1980s, nonformal education programs at the preschool level began to increase in number and in coverage. Since then, some of these programs have moved well beyond the experimental or demonstration phase. Many resemble formal preschools in their methodology and content, but the teachers are community members who are not formally certified or employed on the governmental payroll. These teachers either serve in a volunteer capacity or receive a modest stipend (called a propina or beca or "honorarium"), usually well below the minimum wage. They do not receive social benefits. With the expansion of these programs and modest government remuneration, nonformal programs were included in the counts of children in preschool education programs.

Merging preschool with child development and child care. Although holistic child development has always been a goal of some preschool programs, it has become more prevalent in the preschool field in recent years. Thus, preschool education increasingly includes attention to physical, social, emotional, and mental development, as well as to nutritional, health, and educational needs. At the same time, there is growing agreement that programs of child care (some of which cover children up to school entrance, bypassing preschool all together) should have a more integrated and developmental focus, moving beyond custodial care. This evolution in thinking has helped to blur the lines between preschool education, child care, and child development.

Including parental education programs. In keeping with the idea that learning begins at birth, some parental education programs are now handled by preschool organizations (rather than by adult education divisions) and are included in reports on preschool education programs (this trend is evident in Mexico, Cuba, and Chile, among other countries of the region).

Shifts in the international paradigm. In 1990, the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) shifted its emphasis from education to learning and incorporated all of the above changes in thinking about educational responsibilities during the preschool years. The WCEFA conclusions state: "Learning begins at birth. This calls for early childhood care and initial education. These can be provided through arrangements involving families, communities, or institutional programmes, as appropriate" (Article 5). The conference also recommended the "expansion of early childhood care and development activities, including family and community interventions, especially for poor, disadvantaged and disabled children" (Paragraph 8).

Many studies have shown early childhood programs to be highly beneficial, not only on a personal level in the short term but also on a social and economic level in the long term. Mounting evidence from the fields of physiology, nutrition, health, sociology, psychology, and education indicates that the early years are crucial in the formation of intelligence, personality, and social behavior. Human intelligence develops in large part before the age of seven (Bloom 1964), and brain cells do most of their growing in the first

two years of life, accompanied by the structuring of neural connections in the brain. This process is affected by nutritional and health status and by the way a child interacts with the people and things in its environment (Dobbing 1987). If the brain develops under optimum conditions, learning potential increases and the chances of failure in school and in life decrease. Educational programs have been shown to create such conditions and thus to promote brain development and learning potential.

Numerous scientific studies have also demonstrated that children who receive consistent, caring attention are generally better nourished, less apt to be sick, and better able to learn than those who do not receive such care (Zeitlin, Ghassemi, and Mansour 1990). It is not just the lack of food or health care that causes these differences, but psychological and social neglect create stress, which in turn damages the immune system. Furthermore, a lack of physical interaction in the earliest months of life will have an adverse effect on the functioning of growth hormones. These findings make clear the need for a holistic approach to education through integrated attention to physical, mental, social, and emotional development. Such multifaceted, multisectoral, and integral attention should begin in the very first months and years of life. This contrasts with the argument that education strategies should concentrate on intellectual development during the year preceding entrance into primary school.

As already mentioned, the benefits of preschool programs accrue to societies as well as to individual children. These benefits fall into four categories:

**1. Economic benefits, which consist of increased economic productivity, employment opportunities, and cost savings.**

Quite apart from the ample scientific literature linking improvements in schooling and learning to increased employment and economic productivity (see Box 2), common sense suggests that a person who is physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally fit is more employable and better equipped to contribute economically to family, community, and country than a person who is not. Also, early preventive efforts clearly produce cost savings later on. The economic arguments for investing in early childhood programs are reinforced by the broad shift in economic policy occurring in the region. With the growing emphasis on open economies, the countries of Latin America will need a well-educated and flexible labor force in order to compete globally. In other words, improving their human resource base has become an important economic objective. This is a process that begins well before children enter into school.

**2. Social benefits that would reduce inequalities and strengthen social and moral values.** Those who live in poverty struggle to

overcome not only unhealthy conditions and economic stress but also inequalities in early development and learning. Learning inequalities merely exacerbate the economic and social inequalities surrounding the poor. Children from families with few resources quickly fall behind their more advantaged peers, and that gap in mental development and readiness for school and life is never closed. In Chile, poverty-related differences in psycho-motor development have been shown to emerge by 18 months and to increase thereafter. Thus it is not surprising that 40 percent of all poor children in the country exhibit signs of slow development by age five.<sup>1</sup>

By failing to foster early childhood learning and development where living conditions are difficult, governments have tacitly endorsed and strengthened existing inequalities. Ironically, one argument sometimes used against early education programs is that they are discriminatory, in that they favor the upper class. This is certainly true where no special programs are available for the poor or if programs of early education, care, and development are only for those who can pay for them. But it is not true if programs are carefully directed toward those most in need.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the economic adjustment reforms that have swept across Latin America and the Caribbean during the past decade or so have increased the levels of poverty and social inequality in these regions (ECLAC 1994). As one step toward moderating the undesirable social effects of adjustment, countries are seeking ways to improve the conditions of learning and development for children of the poor. Chile and Venezuela are among several countries that have already introduced early childhood programs explicitly within a social equity framework. And international organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank have become increasingly responsive to such investments.

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<sup>1</sup> Seguel, Izquierdo, and Edwards (1992) report that 50 percent of the children experience delays in their language development, 30 percent in their visual and motor development, and 17 percent in their gross motor development.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a review of 19 early childhood interventions shows that children from so-called disadvantaged groups not only profit from such programs but in a number of cases may profit disproportionately (Myers 1992).

## BOX 2:

### ECONOMIC EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF INVESTING IN INITIAL EDUCATION

**Economic productivity and employment.** Early childhood interventions have been shown to affect economic productivity and employment in adult life through a chain of relationships. First, in comparisons of similar children who have participated in various kinds of preschool activities and those who have not, the former demonstrate improved preparedness for school in terms of gains in physical growth and mental capacity. These preschool gains lead to increased enrollment and to improved progress and performance in school (see the review of 19 longitudinal studies by Myers 1992b; the classic High/Scope Perry Preschool Study reported in Schweinhart et al. 1993; and McGuire and Austin 1987). Second, schooling in turn fosters changes in outlook that affect adult behavior (see, for example, Inkeles and Smith 1974) and help build such skills as the ability to organize knowledge into meaningful categories, to transfer knowledge from one situation to another, and to be more selective in the use of information (Rogoff 1980; Triandis 1980). Schooling also facilitates technological adaptiveness (Grawe 1979), which helps increase the productivity both of farmers (Lockheed, Jamison, and Lau 1980) and of workers in the informal sectors (Colclough 1980). Through a series of chain reactions, then, early interventions can have a substantial effect on adult productivity.

Many early childhood education programs that function as child care programs as well have important side effects: they permit more women to participate in the labor force and free older siblings (usually girls) to learn and earn at a higher level. In many cases, women without access to child care and development alternatives are unable to consider employment in economically productive jobs outside the home because they must care for the young children there. According to an evaluation of the Colombian program of Hogares de Cuidado Diario (Ortiz et al. 1992), 20 percent of the women with children in the program changed their employment status after placing their children in a child care home.

**Cost-benefit calculations and cost savings.** The few cost-benefit calculations performed so far indicate a potentially high rate of return to investments in early childhood. Marcelo Selowsky, using Chilean data, concluded that "yearly investments per child in programs that can induce a change in ability equal to one standard deviation" can be 'justified' if they cost "between .37 and .51 times the yearly wage of an illiterate worker" (Sewlowky 1981, p. 342). These outcomes are reasonable to expect from early education programs. Data from the High/Scope Perry project in the United States suggest that the returns on a preschool investment can be sevenfold (Schweinhart 1993). The cost savings in this case were connected with reduced levels of crime, less need for remedial programs, and less demand for other social programs. Early childhood programs also achieve savings by (a) reducing repetition and dropout and thereby reducing inefficiencies in school systems (see Myers 1992a; and the evaluation of PROAPE in Brazil [Ministerio da Saude 1983] showing that preschool costs were more than recovered because repetition was reduced in the first two primary school years); (b) reducing work losses by ensuring that children of workers are well taken care of and thus making it less necessary for parents to take time off from work (Galinsky 1986); and (c) reducing health costs through preventive measures associated with good care and education (Evans 1986).

Another important social concern in regard to early education, whether in the home or in organized programs outside the home, is that this is where a society's social and moral values begin to take shape. If those values show signs of erosion, a strong incentive exists to strengthen them through early childhood programs that reinforce the resolve and positive actions of parents and that provide environments that help children absorb culturally desirable values.

3. Political benefits. Although children cannot vote, politicians, particularly at the local level, recognize that children can provide a rallying point for social and political actions. Most parents want a better future for their children and are often willing to collaborate and sacrifice to that end. This mobilizing potential of preschool programs can help reinforce participatory decentralization and local democracy.



With the spread of democracy, the countries of Latin America are more and more in need of a welleducated citizenry. Education helps protect democratic systems from being distorted and controlled by a few individuals. Preschool programs are the first step on the path to a more educated citizenry. Equally important, their form and content instill in children those traits considered essential to democracy. At present, most primary schooling in Latin America continues to impart knowledge in a manner that discourages the child from exploring and questioning ideas with the help of a teacher and instead emphasizes the authoritarian relationship between teacher and child.

**4. Demographic pressures.** Changing demographic conditions also account for the increasing need for preschool programs in Latin America. First, more children now survive than in the past<sup>3</sup>. Second, more Latin American and Caribbean women work outside the home than ever before. Third, the continuing high rural-urban migration is disrupting families and forcing them to change their child-rearing patterns and practices. These changes have increased the demand for early childhood care and education programs. Without such programs, the well-being of children in the region will suffer greatly.

The importance of early development for success or failure in later life has already been amply demonstrated in the literature. Thus the main question for education policy makers today is not so much whether to invest in early education but how to invest so that programs will provide the desirable economic, social, and political benefits and yet remain efficient and affordable. Before that question can be answered, an inventory needs to be taken of current practices in the preschool field.

## TAKING STOCK

### COVERAGE

Where Latin America's preschool programs stand in their coverage and stage of advancement is

not altogether clear. The available statistics do not lend themselves to easy comparison because the definitions and ages used in reporting preschool education enrollments vary from country to country. Furthermore, no information is available on the percentage of children enrolled in unregistered preschool programs. Often, figures for nonformal programs also go unreported. To add to these problems, some collection and reporting results are either filled with inaccuracies or are out of date, particularly on the regional scale<sup>4</sup>. These and other issues related to the gathering of information and to statistical interpretation are set out in Appendix A. For all of these reasons, enrollment figures must be treated with caution, particularly when they are aggregated at a regional level or used to make cross-national comparisons.

These cautions notwithstanding, the available statistical information, buttressed by program evaluations and direct observations, seems to indicate several general trends in preschool educational coverage in the region.

**The great variation in the level of coverage among countries of the region is related only in part to per capita income.** Differences in enrollment are also linked to factors such as political will and the way in which social policy is defined. Jamaica, for instance, reported a 1992 per capita income of only US\$ 1,390 but an enrollment level of 83 percent for all children aged three to five, whereas Argentina, with a per capita income more than four times as great (\$ 6,050) reported enrollment of 68 percent for children aged four and five. Colombia, with an estimated per capita income close to that of Jamaica (US\$ 1330), reported a 44 percent enrollment, but only for five-year-olds.

<sup>3</sup> For Latin American and the Caribbean region as a whole, the mortality rate for children under the age of five is estimated to have dropped from 157 per 1,000 live births in 1960 to 48 per 1,000 l.r. in 1993 (UNICEF 1995, Table 10). This means that about 20 of 21 children born now live to age five (in contrast to 5 of 6 born in 1960). Instead of facing the risk of death, these surviving children now face delayed and debilitated development.

<sup>4</sup> Although national figures may be reasonably up to date, they are not always public or easy to obtain. As a basis for writing this section of the report UNESCO kindly provided its latest sets of figures, one from the regional office, OREALC, and another from the UNESCO Statistical Yearbook of 1994. From Table 1 in Appendix A, the reader will see that the OREALC figures, which are in the process of being updated, range from 1986 to 1991. More recent figures were found in UNICEF's annual country reports for 1994 and the most recent situation analyses carried out by UNICEF. Unfortunately, however, the reporting of preschool enrollments and of related programs of early childhood care and development is not uniform in these documents and most situation analyses were done in 1990 or 1991. In some cases it has been possible to check these figures against others presented in recent unpublished documents from various countries that were available through the Consultative Group network.

**In most countries, the percentage of children covered in preschool programs has grown consistently since 1980.** Ironically, the rate of preschool growth seems to have been greater during the “lost decade” of the 1980s than during the first half of the 1990s, when some economic recovery has occurred within the region. This trend suggests that preschool expansion is not always directly related to economic conditions. The higher growth rate of the 1980s may reflect a lag in adjustment to the economic realities of the time. However, it also seems to reflect the political commitments made in response to the momentum created by the International Year of the Child in 1979.

Up-to-date figures combined with a broader definition of preschool education would no doubt show that most countries continued expanding their preschool programs on a moderate level in the first half of the 1990s and also increased the diversity of preschool models. This suggestion is based on unofficial enrollment figures obtained from recent UNICEF reports and by the fact that international lending for preschool education and early childhood development programs that include an educational component has increased notably during the past five years.<sup>5</sup> It would thus not be surprising to see another spurt in enrollment during the latter half of the 1990s.

**Preschool growth and coverage is still concentrated on children in the year immediately before entry into primary school.** Figures from several countries desegregated according to age (obtained from UNICEF reports) illustrate this concentration. In Costa Rica in 1990, coverage for children aged six and seven was about 62 percent, whereas coverage for children three to five was only 14 percent. In Uruguay in the same year, the figures were 85 percent for age five; 24 percent for age four; and 16 percent for age three. Chile reported coverage of 69.3 percent for children aged five in 1990, but coverage of 20.7 percent for children aged four. For the 1993-94 school year, Venezuela covered 65 percent of children

aged five, but only 47.2 percent and 19.3 percent of children aged four and three, respectively. These figures suggest that coverage for children in the immediate preschool year is at a relatively high level (more than 60 percent) in many countries of the region, but coverage for lower age groups lags far behind. This concentration reflects the continued influence of the conventional view of preschooling.

**There is wide variation in the private-public mix.** The percentage of children in private preschool education ranges from 0 percent in Cuba to 88 percent in Jamaica (see Table 1). According to ORELAC figures, participation in private preschools, by subregion, is as follows: South America, 29 percent; Central America and Panama, 32 percent; the Gulf of Mexico, 11 percent; and the Anglophone Caribbean, 80 percent. The high rate in the Anglophone Caribbean is related in part to the fact that the basic school model in Jamaica, which is run by community groups, is classified as private, and in part to the tendency for Caribbean countries to view early childhood as a family affair in which governments should not intervene.

**Coverage remains biased in favor of urban areas despite the explicit efforts of some countries to compensate for this bias.** As Table 2 shows, only 32 percent of all preschool educational establishments in South America exist in rural areas. If one takes into account that many of these are smaller establishments serving dispersed populations, the rural coverage is probably considerably lower. Note, too, that the definition of urban and rural locations is probably inconsistent across countries. Therefore the percentages reported are very rough at best.

**The coverage for girls and boys is about equal.** The UNESCO Yearbook for 1994 (Table 2.1) reports that 50 percent of the children enrolled in preschools in Latin America and the Caribbean in 1992 were girls. With one exception, the percentage of girls reported for each country in the region ranges from 48 to 52 percent.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Since 1989, the World Bank has made loans for integrated early childhood development and/or preschool programs in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, and Venezuela. The Inter-American Development Bank has provided loan funds for early childhood development in Peru and Nicaragua. At present, these organizations are developing other loans.

<sup>6</sup> The exception is Cuba for which a figure of 43 percent enrollment of girls in 1992 is presented.



TABLE 1:

**GROSS RATES OF PRESCHOOL ATTENTION, BY AGE AND BY COUNTRY, AND GNP  
(PER CAPITA (1992): LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN)**

	Age	% preschool attention			% private	GNP per cap \$US
		1980	1985	1991		
<b>South America</b>		<b>23</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>29</b>	
Argentina	4-5	40	52	58	29	6,050
Bolivia	3-6	26	34 <sup>a</sup>	29 <sup>b</sup>	11	680
Brazil	4-6	14	32 <sup>c</sup>	35	31	2,770
Colombia	5	27	37	44	58	1,330
Chile	5	71	83	70	45	2,730
Ecuador	4-5	10	17	20 <sup>d</sup>	37	1,070
Paraguay	6	12	19	32	50	1,380
Peru	3-5	15	21	36 <sup>e</sup>	12	950
Uruguay	2-5	19	25	33	29	3,340
Venezuela	4-6	34	40	45	16	2,910
<b>Central América</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>32</b>	
Costa Rica	5	39	52	67	13	1,960
El Salvador	4-6	11	15 <sup>d</sup>	19	31	1,170
Guatemala	4-6	14	17	16	47	980
Honduras	5-6	13	18	18	11	580
Nicaragua	3-6	8	14	13	18	340
Panama	5	33	51	54 <sup>e</sup>	9	2,420
<b>Gulf of México</b>		<b>27</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>32</b>	
Cuba	5	60	83	86	0	1,170
Haiti	4-5	—	44 <sup>d</sup>	41 <sup>e</sup>	24	370
Mexico	4-5	25	59	62	9	3,470
Dom. Republic	3-6	4	10	14 <sup>b</sup>	67	1,050
<b>Anglophone Caribbean</b>		<b>68</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>80</b>	
Guyana	4-5	67	73	71 <sup>c</sup>	—	—
Jamaica	3-5	70	76	83 <sup>d</sup>	88	1.390
Trinidad & Tobago	3-4	8	8	8 <sup>d</sup>	—	3.940

Notes: The figures for preschool attention were provided by UNESCO's Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, based on data from the UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, 1994, Paris, 1994. The per capita income figures were taken from: UNICEF State of the World's Children, 1995. New York: UNICEF, 1995, Table 1.

- a. 1986
- b. 1987
- c. 1988
- d. 1989
- e. 1990

TABLE 2

## PERCENTAGE OF PRE-SCHOOL ESTABLISHMENTS IN RURAL AREAS: LATIN AMERICA, CIRCA 1991

Country	Total rural	Rural	%
<b>South America</b>	<b>91,058<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>29,030</b>	<b>32</b>
Argentina	*	*	*
Bolivia	2,294	1,158	50
Brazil	51,557 <sup>b</sup>	15,988	31
Colombia	9,712	1,077	11
Chile	4,302 <sup>c</sup>	276	6
Ecuador	2,371	913	39
Paraguay	870	242	28
Peru	10,132	6,217	61
Uruguay	1,508	431	29
Venezuela	8,312	2,818	34
<b>Central América</b>	<b>6,642</b>	<b>1,952</b>	<b>29</b>
Costa Rica	1,002	472	47
El Salvador	1,271 <sup>b</sup>	276	22
Guatemala	1,507	270	18
Honduras	973 <sup>b</sup>	201	21
Nicaragua	1,081	373	35
Panama	808	360	45
<b>Mexico</b>	<b>49,763</b>	<b>31,188</b>	<b>63</b>

\* information missing

Notes: The figures for preschool establishments were provided by UNESCO's Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, based on a variety of sources including: The UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, Paris, 1988, 1993, 1994; Informes Nacionales; Encuesta SIRI-OREALC-UNESCO, 1987, 1990, 1992; Per: Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, Compendio de Estadísticas Sociales, 1992, Lima 1993; Guatemala: Ministerio de Educación, Anuario estadístico 1992, Guatemala, 1992.

a. The total provided is the total for those countries for which information about rural coverage was provided. If Argentina were included, the total de number of establishments in the South American region would be 100,918.

b. These figures are for 1989.

c. 1987

Coverage is biased against lower-income groups. The official statistics for preschool coverage are not usually broken out by economic status of participants. However, household surveys provide some idea of the bias in three countries: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. The Argentine study, following a method developed by CEPAL, classified families as living in structural poverty, in poverty, or not in poverty. The preschool coverage for children aged four and five in these three groups is as follows:

Age	Structural Poverty	Poor	Not Poor
4	30.8%	41.8%	80.7%
5	64.2%	76.8%	91.0%

In Chile, the preschool coverage in Educación Parvularia for 1992 was 24 percent at the national level, but only 19 percent for the lowest quintile in the income distribution, compared with

43 percent for the highest. When the figures for 1987 and 1992 are compared, the growth in national coverage was 3.2 percent, while growth in the lowest income quintile was 2.4 percent as against 9.5 percent in the highest quintile (Waiser 1995). In Uruguay coverage in 1993 for children aged three to five was 36 percent for the lowest income quintile as against 90 percent for the highest quintile. The gap is even wider (100 percent versus 30 percent) between Montevideo children with parents in the highest quintile and children from the interior in the lowest quartile (ANEP 1995, pp. 5-6). By contrast, in Jamaica in 1989, the community-based preschool program (called basic education) reached 60 percent of the children in the poorest quintile of the income distribution and 81 percent of those in the richest (UNICEF 1991).

Coverage is lower for indigenous than for nonindigenous groups. Statistics from throughout Latin America point to this difference. Mexico, for one, reports 82 percent coverage in Mexico City but only 38 percent in Chiapas, which has a very high concentration of indigenous groups. Another important point to mention is that the quality of the preschool programs in which rich children are enrolled is likely to differ from that of the programs for poor children.

In sum, the extent and public-private mix of preschool coverage appear to vary widely from country to country. Coverage seems to focus on children in the year just before primary schooling and is evidently biased toward urban children who are from the dominant culture and in the upper part of the economic scale.

#### **TYPES OF PROGRAMS**

Numerically, formal programs still dominate the preschool field. These conventional programs conform to the stereotype of groupings of 20 to 30 children attended by trained teachers (normal school or university graduates) who are on the regular education payroll and receive the benefits attached to it. Typically, these programs function for three or four hours each weekday. They focus on preparing children for school. A few may have a nutrition or health component. Although the conventional programs may occur in a variety of locales, most are found in ~~specialty constructed government buildings or~~ are attached to (or within) a primary school.

Despite this continuing dominance of conventional programs, a wealth of experience with "alternative" preschool programs has accumulated in Latin America (Cormack and Fujimoto 1993; JUNJI-OEA 1994). Many of these programs have a local person, usually uncertified but with some sort of crash training course, as the teacher (promotor, animator). These teachers usually receive less than the minimum wage and are not on the formal government payroll. Another feature of alternative programs is that the community tends to be more involved in creating and running them than is the case for conventional programs. Although some alternative programs are run by the government, for the most part these preschools are managed by community groups or by nongovernmental organizations working with the community. Many such preschool initiatives remain at a pilot or demonstration level, but others have grown into relatively large-scale programs. To cite but a few examples, the region boasts community-based nonformal and formal programs, day-care programs with an educational component, parental education programs, and mass media programs.

**Community-based non-formal preschool programs.** In Peru, the PRONOEI program has been functioning for 25 years and now reaches children in approximately 18,000 centers throughout the country. Jamaica's basic schools date back at least 30 years. In the growing EDUCO program in El Salvador, pre and primary schools are comanaged by communal associations and the Ministry of Education.

**Day-care programs with an educational component.** The program of day centers in the home began in Venezuela in 1975, but it did not become a large-scale effort until recently. It now covers well over 200,000 children. Colombia's Hogares Comunitarios program covers 900,000 children, if the official statistics are correct. In Bolivia, the Family Welfare Institute is "going to scale" with a program of day care homes in major urban centers. Peru's Ministry of Education has established a program of day-care homes for children under three years of age with working mothers. The program is said to reach more than 20,000 children and is scheduled for expansion.

**Parental education programs.** This category includes programs in which parents are provided

information in a community locale, through the mass media, during home visits, or in some combination of these. Cuba has recently instituted and evaluated an extensive program of parental education called *Educa a Tu Hijo*. In 1994, it reached the parents of about 46 percent of all preschool-aged children. (Another 13 percent of Cuban children, aged birth to five, participated in day-care arrangements with an educational component called “*circulos infantiles*”, while yet another 13 percent were enrolled in preschool attached to primary schools, bringing to 72 percent the total coverage for all preschool children from birth to age five.) According to a program evaluation, this effort has had a positive influence on the development of young children through their parents, more so, however, in the areas of physical development, socialization, and habit formation than in the area of intellectual development (UNICEF/Cuba, Annual Report 1994). Other growing and sizable programs of parental education are being carried out in Mexico and Chile.

Mass media programs. *Plaza Sesamo*, the Spanish version of *Sesame Street*, has recently made its reappearance in a revised edition prepared for viewing throughout the region.

## CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

As Latin America’s preschool education programs grow larger and more diversified, their challenges and problems also increase. Limitations of space make it necessary to concentrate on three of the primary issues here: equity, quality, and cost. Equally important are community participation, multisectorality and integration (within education, on one hand, and with health and nutrition and with child care, on the other), adjusting to cultural differences, decentralization, and continuity of both political will and technical capacity.

### EQUITY

The coverage and content of preschool education, as indicated earlier, continue to cater to urban children who are disproportionately from the upper-income groups. Although some countries have made strides in reducing the gap in coverage between the rich and poor, the urban and rural, and the Hispanic and non-Hispanic groups, inequalities remain and in

some cases are very wide indeed. If countries are truly concerned about equity, they must find ways to extend coverage to the poor who remain unreached.

Two main equity strategies are being pursued at the present time. Some countries are thinking of making formal preschooling universal for children in the year just prior to the entrance into primary schools. This strategy has been proposed in Costa Rica and Uruguay and is being considered in Mexico. The objective is to achieve 100 percent coverage of children in preschools, but no terms have yet been set out regarding the condition of the children in those schools nor the expected effect of participating in the preschools. Some countries find this idea politically attractive, appealing to teachers’ unions, and easy to monitor because it simply involves counting children, but it has a number of limitations, particularly with respect to how far it can go toward giving all children equal preparation for primary school. This will remain a serious issue if private and public systems continue operating side by side. Also, attacking the problem at age five may be too late.

A second and possibly complementary strategy has been to target unreached populations with specific interventions. Many small and localized programs have been organized throughout Latin America to reach children who are at the social margins because they live in poverty or in dispersed rural areas, or because they are from a minority group or were adversely affected by internal strife. Some programs for poor, rural, or dispossessed children now handle huge numbers of children. In the main, these strategies, whether on a small or large scale, have been of the “nonformal” or “alternative” variety -that is, they are community- based programs employing local education agents provided with some initial training and then supported by a supervisory structure. Often, the community is expected to provide the locale in which children or parents gather. Perhaps the greatest concern about these programs is their level of quality, which is related in part to their “compensatory” nature.

Some other ways of trying to reach the unreached are also worth noting:

- Ecuador experimented with itinerant preschool teachers. Although this idea appeared

to be feasible and to have a positive effect on children, it was abandoned in the wake of political changes.

- Mexico has a program that employs students with three years of secondary school as preschool teachers in very small communities. The students are by and large from outside the communities in which they will function as education agents. They are given two months of intensive training before they begin the school year and are supported by a system of continuing on-the-job supervision and monthly meetings. Secondary school students have a strong incentive to take these positions because, after a year, they are given financial support for three years that will enable them to continue their studies in pre-university courses.
- Several countries have established special bilingual and in some cases bicultural programs for indigenous groups. Unfortunately, these programs tend to focus more on getting young children prepared in Spanish than on becoming proficient in the mother tongue. A bilingual program in Bolivia for Guarani speakers is an exception.
- Mexico has a special program as well for the children of temporary migrant workers in the country.
- Radio has been used to reach parents in outlying areas as well as to support preschool teachers in their daily work.

Several complex issues still need to be addressed in devising programs for the unreached children.

**Do the unreached want to be reached?** An analysis of demand in Chile suggests that the lack of preschool programs is only a minor factor contributing to the relatively low level of coverage in preschool programs for children under the age of six; cultural traditions and beliefs strongly favor keeping children at home (Waiser 1995). In Mexico, parents of children in a program to combat educational disadvantages (PARE) were asked why their children did not attend preschool. Only 12 percent of those in urban areas cited the lack of a preschool place as a reason in comparison with 60 percent in rural areas. For those who had access to

preschooling, distance and economic problems were prominent reasons for keeping a child out of preschool. Lack of interest or a feeling that preschool was not necessary was cited by 12 percent of all parents as a reason why their child did not attend preschool (Myers 1995). The conclusion from these studies and from general experience is that creating demand (not just responding to it) must be an important part of any program directed at the unreached.

**How can the problem of distance be overcome in areas where the population is dispersed or terrain is difficult?** The tendency in most educational programs is to organize children in sizable groups (to take advantage of a less costly ratio of children to teachers). Under this system, children must be brought to the program, but this is difficult to do when children are below the age of six since they are unable to walk long distances. Alternatives that have been tried include home visits by an education agent who works with parents or siblings to enable them to serve as the home-based education agent for the young child; revised standards reducing the number of children who must be present in a place before a program can be established; support for informal local initiatives in settlements of less than 100 people; transportation to school for children;<sup>7</sup> and the use of radio for instruction.

**Can quality be maintained at the same time that equity is sought without incurring exorbitant and unmanageable costs?** These two issues are taken up below.

## QUALITY

Quality as it applies to all facets of education, including preschool education, is an elusive concept. Too often, it is assessed by rough quantitative measures of program inputs such as the formal qualifications and training of teachers, the availability of educational materials, and the kinds of facilities being used. Such measures are useful but superficial. Although a teacher's formal qualifications may, and usually do, indicate a greater potential for providing quality attention, what counts even more is what

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<sup>7</sup> Obviously this is only possible where dispersed settlements or homes are fairly close to a highway (even though they may not be close to a school). This may be more cost effective than hiring additional teachers to work with very small groups in dispersed areas.

teachers actually do and whether their activities have a positive effect on children. Indeed, it is not that difficult to find a well-trained, duly certified preschool teacher who is also authoritarian, insensitive, directive, long on theory and short on practice, and unable to relate to parents. By the same token, an uncertified teacher may be democratic, sensitive with children, and sensational with parents. The point is that standards must go beyond paper qualifications or material inputs to the kinds of effective preschool intervention that will produce the desired results.

A review of literature dealing with the quality of early education provides some clues to the possible features of such intervention (see Box 3). Although these features can only be touched on within the scope of this discussion, it is important to note that they imply a set of cultural and social values that are widely, but by no means universally shared. Nevertheless, this set provides a point of departure for constructive discussion.

As already mentioned, it is impossible to report in a systematic way on the quality of early educational practice in Latin America. Most studies that look at the dimensions set out in Box 3 are for internal use and are not in the public domain. The indicators that are available to the public provide a few clues but no real insight into quality. A UNICEF report released in 1995 indicates that only 7 percent of the preschool teachers in Belize had received formal training up to that year but says nothing about how well those teachers taught, which is more to the point. Similarly, official statistics in Mexico show that the average number of preschool children per teacher was 24.5 to 1 during the 1993-94 school year but do not tell how the teachers performed. Several promising reviews of varied preschool models are being carried out (or were recently completed) in Chile, Jamaica, Mexico, and elsewhere but were not available at the time of this writing. It is hoped they will shed some light on this issue.

If the standards set out in Box 3 for "quality" preschool programs could be applied systematically to large-scale programs of early education in Latin America (or elsewhere for that matter), most programs would probably be rated low in quality. It is not that programs fail to define their aims clearly; rather, the aims are

imposed from above, by a central bureaucracy, and are seldom the ones hoped for by program participants. Many other deficiencies would have to be pointed out as well. Education agents often lack motivation and are not well trained or sensitive, and their turnover is fairly high. Curricula are often integrative, active, and meaningful in theory but not in practice. The ratio of children to adults in most Latin American preschool programs is beyond 20 children per adult and often much higher. The learning environments frequently consist of makeshift equipment and facilities, many of which are unsanitary and far from secure. Supervision, like inspection, is rare and little thought is given to continuing on-the-job training for the adults who work directly with the children. No attempt is made to adjust educational activities through the systematic application of validated evaluation methods. At best, parental participation is weak, and at worst it is absent in large scale preschool programs.

Does this list, if correct, mean that early education programs in Latin America., large and small, are inherently or inevitable ineffective and of poor quality? Certainly not. Lira's review of 25 preschool programs (including several larger-scale programs) clearly demonstrated a high level of effectiveness. Further, that effectiveness is not tied to the locale<sup>8</sup> or to the kind of materials used or to the particular curriculum theory followed. Rather, it appears to be closely related to the quality of the educational agent. This does not mean that the educational agent has to be a "professional" with a formal certificate. But neither does it mean that the agent can simply be a motivated and loving person from the community, devoid of any training. There is more to early education than that. At the same time, it is clear that people from distinct educational backgrounds can become effective educational agents if they acquire the skills that characterize an effective educator. Thus before a community member can be transformed into an effective educational agent, experience needs to be combined with training and supervision.

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<sup>8</sup> "Ha habido programas eficaces en locales especialmente contruidos para ese efecto, en sedes sociales de la comunidad, en hogares de sectores marginales.... Pareciera que basta con un lugar limpio, ventilado, sin riesgos y con espacio suficiente para que los niños jueguen" (Lira 1994, p. 215).



### BOX 3.

#### QUALITY IN EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Among the elements that define quality as identified in effective early education programs are the following:

- Aims and objectives. Clear aims and objectives set and shared by teachers and parents, understood by children, and subject to modification through a process involving all of the interested parties. The process of agreeing upon such aims and objectives may be more important than the specific outcomes of the process.
- Education agents. The continuous presence of sensitive, healthy, committed, loving, and responsible adults who are knowledgeable about how children develop (as a result of experience and training) and who interact with children in a consistent, respectful, supportive, and unthreatening way.
- Curriculum. A proven curriculum that takes a holistic view of a child's development; provides a variety of relevant, stimulating, and enjoyable learning experiences pertinent to both planting roots and learning to fly; encourages children to explore, play, and initiate their own learning activities; and respects and attends to individual differences. A quality curriculum will integrate education and care while attending to physical, social, and emotional needs as well as to cognitive or intellectual needs. It fosters sound relationships of the child to self, others, and the environment.
- Physical environment. A clean, ventilated, stimulating, secure, healthy environment (locale) providing enough space for children to play.
- Evaluation. Use of systematic and validated evaluation methods to adjust teaching to the specific needs of children.
- Adult/child ratio. A ratio of children to adults that is low enough to permit frequent interaction and personal attention.
- Training/supervision. Meaningful training on the job and supervisory support, fostering continued professional and personal growth.
- Educational leadership. Strong educational leadership devoting considerable time to coordinating and managing the program while staying close to the daily process of educating and socializing children.
- Parental and community participation. Real involvement and participation of families and communities as partners in the program, helping it to function well and learning how to improve their attention to young children in the process.
- Resources. Consistency and permanence made possible by a financial and material resource base that is large enough to work with children in an appropriate way and to sustain educational actions over time without distracting education agents from their immediate educational task.

Sources: Ball 1994; Moss and Pence 1995; Schweinhart 1995; NAEYC 1986; Basili 1994.

Note, too, that programs can be judged low in quality by some cannons but effective by others. Few Latin American programs will be able to stand up to a demanding ideal. If, however, their environments, (physical conditions, methods, and content) are compared with the alternative conditions in which children learn and develop, and the criteria in Box 3 are again used, the program environment will seem fairly good, even with its many imperfections. This is particularly true for program components such as language production or for children who live in conditions of intense poverty. At the extreme, suppose that parents struggling to survive must tie a two-year-old in a crib for several hours of the day while they go out to work, and compare this environment with that of almost any child care program. The program will no doubt appear far superior, imperfect though it might be.

As programs grow larger, then, the challenge will not be just to attain or maintain quality but also to choose an appropriate standard of quality against which to evaluate them. In deciding on such a standard, it is well to remember that different cultures set different criteria and standards for quality, in line with their particular conditions and their particular values, customs, and beliefs. Furthermore, the standards for judging quality may be different at different points in time. To understand the relative nature of quality is to recognize that “the best can be the enemy of the good,” particularly if “the best” costs so much that it will only be available to the few who can afford to pay a high price or to the very few who could profit from a lesser program.

What happens when “good” rather than “best” solutions to the quality problem are put alongside equity in the content and results of preschool programs? Indeed, many of the nonformal early education alternatives gaining ground in Latin America are criticized precisely because they are said to be of low quality when compared with private or even formal public programs. This criticism is often based on the fact that teachers are not certified and do not know how to apply the approved preschool curriculum or on the poor conditions of many facilities that fail to meet the minimum government standards. Although such criticism has its place, it can easily be exaggerated. Many “alternative” programs are more integral, more active, more participatory, and more pertinent to local needs than the formal preschool programs

with which they are being compared. Again, part of the problem lies in the standard chosen.

What is important to know is whether the outcomes of alternative preschool programs, whatever the standards, are on a par with those of the formal and conventional programs provided to similar children. Rarely is such information available. Quality will indeed be difficult to judge without a better idea of these relative effects of different programs on the development of children and their preparedness for schooling and life.

Several general conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing discussion:

- Preschool program quality falls well short of the ideal, and there is considerable room for improvement.
- When assessing quality, it is wise to compare program environments with alternative learning environments, not just with ideal standards.
- Formal programs may or may not be better than nonformal alternatives when the standard is results and when all dimensions of quality, including relevance, participation, and active learning are taken into account. But since the evidence is limited, the jury is still out.
- One should not assume, a priori, that a preschool program is of lower than average quality because it is inexpensive, because it is nonformal, or because it is carried out by people without professional certification.

## **COSTS, EFFECTS, AND FINANCING**

Policy makers and programmers are right to be concerned about costs, given the plethora of problems they have to contend with and the limited resources available to do so. For the most part, data on the costs of preschool programs of various types are difficult to come by. One of the few sources of such information is Lira’s (1994) review of 25 studies of the costs of conventional and nonconventional preschool education programs carried out in eight countries of Latin America over the past 17 years. As Lira points out, however, the cost

figures she reviewed cannot be directly compared because they are for different years, apply to programs with different purposes, elements, and beneficiaries, arise in different economic contexts, and were calculated using different methodologies. Nevertheless, a few points emerge from the information Lira collected:

- Preschool program costs vary enormously, principally because the assessments were based on a host of factors, ranging from project components (e.g., does the program include a feeding component or not), the kind of educational agents chosen (professional or paraprofessional), the ratios of adults to children, and the length of time the program operates (half day versus full) to operational costs alone versus operational and investment costs, and the costs judged from an institutional perspective versus a broader social perspective.<sup>9</sup>
- Human resources normally account for the highest costs in preschool programs, although in some cases the cost of food may be higher. The human resource cost is concentrated in the payment of salaries for those who actually attend children; relatively little cost is attached to supervision or continued training.
- In nonconventional programs, communities frequently absorb the major portion of the costs, principally by providing local labor, which, if remunerated, carries a price below the minimum wage and thus is treated as a subsidy to the program. In the Colombian program of Community Day-Care Homes, the community covered about 56 percent of the total costs (Castillo 1993).

As this last point indicates, the costs themselves are not the only concern. Also important is who bears the costs and the sources of financing, in absolute terms or as a proportion of the education budget. Again, little solid information is available on these questions. Government

reports on the costs of education frequently lump preschool expenditures together with the figures for primary schooling. Now and then, preschooling is broken out, as is the case in Trinidad and Tobago. Here, the government's allocation to preschool education amounts to only .15 percent of the total education budget. It is wise, however, to exercise caution in interpreting such figures. The Trinidad and Tobago figure is very misleading because the country has already incorporated all five-year-olds into the primary school system. The budget amounts and expenditures associated with the education of these children, who would usually be classified as preschool children, are hidden in the primary school budget and expenditures.

In the case of Chile, approximately nine percent of the 1993 education budget was earmarked for preschool (parvulos) programs (Recart and Valenzuela 1995). The current level for Uruguay is approximately the same (ANEP 1995). A recent calculation for Mexico (Myers 1995) suggests that expenditures for preschool education in 1992 constituted about five percent of all educational expenditures during the year. These relatively high figures should not be taken as being representative of the level of financial commitment to preschool education by most governments of the region. The figures cited for Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay are for systems in which the enrollment in preschooling has already expanded to significant levels. Furthermore, when set against enrollments, preschooling does not pull its share of the budget even with these apparently "high" figures. In the Mexican case, although the preschool expenditures reach five percent of the total education budget, that figure falls well short of preschool's ten percent share of total enrollment in the education system.

Perhaps closer to a regional standard is the case of Jamaica, where 2.5 percent of the education budget is given over to early education. This level must be seen against the approximately 20 percent of the total school population who are at the preschool level. Even the Jamaican percentage may be high for the region as a whole. An unconfirmed "guestimate" would be that the majority of the countries in the region devote considerably less than two percent of their education budgets to early childhood education. If this is so, it may in part be a simple reflection of the fact that preschool

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<sup>9</sup> Compare, for example, the cost per child per year, in 1993 dollars, of a conventional preschool in Argentina (estimated at US\$ 3,611), a conventional preschool in Chile (estimated at US\$ 810), and a community day-care home in Colombia (estimated at \$US 340). All of these calculations were for a complete day and include food costs. The Chilean figure is for operational costs, whereas the other two include all costs.

education is being supported on a shoestring. However, it may also be that preschooling in some countries is financed more by private sources, the community, or other noneducation budgets.<sup>10</sup> More systematic evidence is needed to verify these speculations.

What does seem clear is that the countries of the region face several challenges with respect to costs and financing. To begin with, they need to collect better information, particularly on costs as they relate to measures of program effectiveness. Information is also lacking on the private sector's contributions to preschooling, and on the precise nature of community contributions. Furthermore, little is known about what happens to costs and effects as programs expand or decentralize. Without better data, it will be exceedingly difficult to get at the real cost implications of reaching the unreached.

Policy makers face another challenge -and an opportunity- in the apparently low levels of investment in early education. Small increases in the percentage of the total education budget devoted to early education could have a large effect on coverage or quality at the preschool level without serious adverse consequences for other levels of the system. And this, as indicated earlier, would constitute a good economic and social investment for the country. To the extent that the investment helps reduce repetition rates, it may even pay for itself. But even then it will take some effort to convince politicians and planners of the potential economic and social benefits of investing in early education.

Yet another challenge for policy makers is to find an appropriate mix of support for early education. Ways must be found to share costs without placing an undue burden on families and communities that cannot afford to bear those costs and without creating economic disincentives in the private sector.

## **SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PLANNING**

### **COVERAGE, EQUITY, AND QUALITY**

The central problem for Latin American policy makers and programmers as they invest in preschool/early childhood programs in the coming years will not be how to extend coverage, but how to improve equity and the quality of programs for the unreached. Many children from privileged homes are already enrolled in public or private preschool programs, even though they do not need the same degree of stimulation and preparation for school that children from less privileged homes require in order to get a "fair start" in school.

The answer to this problem may not be the strategy of universal coverage being proposed in formal preschools at the age prior to primary school. The trouble is, this strategy will not guarantee that all children are equally prepared for primary school if there are major differences in the quality of the formal preschools or if poor children continue to arrive at this age far behind more privileged children in their development. Accordingly, governments facing difficult decisions about how to allocate scarce funds may be well advised -for social, economic, and even political reasons- to favor in their preschool budgets a diversity of programs designed to reach children and families living in poverty. Providing sustainable formal or nonformal programs of quality for these children should take preference over low-cost, low-quality, quick-fix alternatives that show increased numbers but do not take into account or seek quality as measured by effects. Such a strategy will be particularly important for programs directed at children below the age of four, which at present are receiving next to no attention in most countries. Several conditions will have to be met if such a strategy is to be taken seriously.

- It will be necessary to create demand rather than simply respond to it. As this is being done, policy makers will need to respect as well as expand cultural practices and values.
- ~~New norms will have to be developed and new ways found to bring programs to children. Because many of the enriched preschoolers are in rural areas and often at some distance from larger towns, it makes~~

<sup>10</sup> For instance, support for the children in the large-scale program of home day care in Colombia is found in the budget of the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare and not in the Education (ICBF) budget. Moreover, this amounts to about US\$400 million, obtained through a payroll tax.

no sense to locate preschool centers in towns and expect that children will automatically attend them. The standard urban norm of 20 or 30 preschoolers will have to be adjusted to the particular circumstances of each rural area. In addition, attention will have to be given to new systems of supervision and continuing education for teachers. Required instruction in Spanish, if it exists, may also need to be modified.

- A broad range of strategies and models will have to be tested, not just one. A critical lesson can be learned here from the failure of primary school systems to diversity in response to local conditions as they expanded. Models must not be too homogeneous yet their results must be consistent. There must be room for programs that are center-based and home-based, formal and nonformal, directly provided and provided at a distance, directed at children and directed at parents. There must also be room for programs that provide child care during a full day and those that do not. No one standard curriculum or methodology should be applied rigidly to all children. In this portfolio of preschool programs, the common denominators should be a desire to meet the mental, physical, social, and emotional development needs of the particular children enrolled, and close attention to program quality as indicated by results rather than by inputs.
- In the process of reaching out, the common standards applied in the selection of preschool teachers may need to be adjusted and new ways found to help teachers continue their education and become certified. Their learning through guided experience on the job should count as much as their participation in formal and theoretical educational courses.
- In focusing attention on those most in need of help with their early development and learning, governments must not fail to attend to health and nutritional as well as to purely educational needs.

## **COST**

For all of the above reasons, a focused program of preschool and developmental education that places equity and quality at its center will, in all

likelihood, carry a higher cost per child than the present strategies, which are primarily for children living in concentrated urban areas, often in more or less favored conditions. If serious attention is to be given to equity and quality, governments must be prepared to spend the money required to produce the desired effects, even though the cost-effectiveness ratios for such programs do not quite match those for programs whose children are easy to reach. It is also essential to guard against low-cost solutions that increase enrollment and look good on paper but that have no effect on the development and learning of children.

If the costs of reaching the unreached are somewhat higher than average, this should not deter governments from their policy. However, because budgets are limited, it may be necessary along the way to apply more stringent selection criteria in the short run to projects -to focus projects even more. And it will be necessary to diversity sources of financing (see the discussion on "partnerships" below).

At the same time, it is important to remember that funding for preschool programs does not represent a high proportion of any education budget in the region, so there is room for expansion, which is arguably a good economic and social investment.

## **PARTNERSHIP**

For social and economic, as well as educational reasons, governments will need to seek partners for their early education ventures. They must take care to build partnerships with several kinds of entities: with parents and communities; with nongovernmental organizations in the social sector; with the private sector, with ministries and organizations dedicated principally to education, health, or nutrition; and with the mass media. These efforts all entail large challenges.

One challenge will be to avoid taking a "compensatory" approach to a partnership. The word "partnership" itself implies mutual respect, equality, and a sharing of responsibility for both the program's successes and failures. Far more preferable is a "constructive" approach, in which communities and governments (or NGOs) work together to construct an agenda, by building on existing strengths (rather than compensating for weaknesses). However, a partnership must



entail more than just sharing or “recovering” costs. If parents and communities are expected to provide part of the financing and much of the labor to make a program work, they should be expected (not just allowed) to participate directly in decisions affecting the program. If NGOs are asked to help with the administration of programs, they, too, should participate directly in the decision making.

In center-based programs, partnership with parents is essential not only to make centers run better, but also to share the educational task. Parents continue to be the first teachers of young children. They usually need support as they perform that role, whether consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, one goal of programs should be to forge a kind of partnership in which parents learn to be better parents even while helping preschool programs improve.

A second large challenge arises in getting organizations responsible for education or health or nutrition programs to integrate their activities. The delivery of services is usually organized vertically. Each organization has its own norms and ways of working. Many vested interests are at work. It may be more realistic, therefore, to encourage different services or bureaucratic programs to converge on particularly vulnerable groups of the population rather than try to “integrate” services. This means the highest levels of government must reach a consensus on the target populations to which each sector should be delivering its services, also that community organizations must develop the strength and ability to do the necessary demanding and integrating of program services at the local level.

If the private sector is to be brought in as a partner, the economic advantages of investing in early childhood education and development need to be made clear. Various options for partnership with the private sector can be contemplated besides the traditional one requiring businesses of a certain size to provide child care on the premises for their workers. This strategy has sometimes caused prejudice against women workers. Neighborhood arrangements are one such option. They have proved to be particularly convenient for most families, since they get around the need to transport young children, often in public transport over long distances, from home to the

place of work. Another way to tap private sector funding for preschool and child care programs is through the publicly administered use of a payroll tax (as in Colombia). This strategy relieves individual enterprises of the responsibility for creating and administering a preschool/day care center and spreads the financial responsibility.

To date, the mass media’s potential for reaching children, parents, communities, and teachers with structured programs that will draw attention to early learning has not been adequately exploited. This potentially low-cost approach to early learning merits further attention and development.

## **MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

Governments should be playing a more active role in the monitoring and evaluation of early childhood education programs. Even the apparently simple task of reporting on preschool coverage does not seem to be under firm control, owing in part to the lack of agreement on the definitions guiding reporting. Disaggregation also requires attention.

But more important than the counting and reporting of numbers involved in diverse types of preschool programs, management information systems are needed to track inputs, locate bottlenecks, and help participants at various levels plan and evaluate immediate outputs. Such systems have been developed and are being used in a few countries of the region. But since early education is still not obligatory in most places, commands a very small portion of the budget, and has only recently begun to grow significantly, little systematic attention has been given to monitoring the preschool sector.

It is also essential for early childhood development and preschool experts to agree on indicators and instruments that can be used to define the condition of children, the desired qualities of learning environments, and the effects of preschool programs on children. Several kinds should be used, beginning with screening indicators that can serve to identify individual children who need special attention. These indicators reflect the condition of the child and need to be handled with utmost care to avoid premature labeling of children. Indicators of the child’s immediate environment should also



be included in the screening process. A second type of indicator and measurement instrument would follow the progress of individual children while they are in a program. Progress would be measured by parent and teacher observation over time of the ways in which children relate to themselves, to others, and to the environment. Further indicators would describe the general wellbeing of children for the population as a whole (and for subgroups within the population). These indicators, which ideally would include health and nutrition and psychosocial indicators, would show how the children of a country are progressing. Note that no country in Latin America is currently in a position to describe systematically and periodically the condition of its children at the point of entry into primary school, despite the fact that this is one of the most important changes in life.<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The discussion closes with a few words of caution in view of the state of practice and the early stage of development of preschool education programs.

- Do not permit an academic, rigid, and authoritarian approach to teaching and learning to be carried from primary school into the preschool years. Instead, move the active, integral approach of preschooling into the early years of primary education.
- Resist the temptation, for bureaucratic ease or the path of least resistance, to impose one formal model or program on the varied conditions that are bound to present themselves throughout a country. Diversity will become the byword as decentralization gathers force.

- While stressing quality in all programs, do not let the best be the enemy of the good.
- Keep track not only of enrollments and inputs, but also of how the children are faring as programs are introduced and grow. Give undivided attention to reducing the percentage of children who arrive at primary school with stunted development.
- Avoid focusing all political energy on universalizing the coverage of formal preschooling in the year prior to primary school. The emphasis should be on children and their developmental condition. This means attention should also be given to children between birth and age four as well as between age five and six, through a variety of programs that include the education and support of parents in their parenting role. By taking this broader view, in which “learning begins at birth,” governments can more appropriately fulfill the promises they made as signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and as participants in the World Conference on Education for All. The World Conference purposely did not frame recommendations in terms of formal preschool coverage but rather stated that “learning begins at birth.” Early childhood care and initial education foster that learning. They can be provided through families, communities, or institutional programs, as appropriate (Article 5). The conference recommended “...expansion of early childhood care and development activities, including family and community interventions, especially for poor, disadvantaged, and disabled children.”

To follow through with this expansion is clearly an immense challenge for the rest of this century and beyond.

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<sup>11</sup> A project currently under way in Jamaica and Colombia was designed to create a Child Status Profile at the point of entry into school. The projects seek to combine information obtained through existing home survey systems in the two countries with information collected by the health sector and by the education sector during the first days of entry into primary school. Profiling is to take place every two years and thus will show how the population of children is changing (or not as the case may be) and along what dimensions. The profile will also be used to identify groups of children most in need and collect baseline data on how children perform in their first years of primary school.

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## APPENDIX A:

### PRESCHOOL STATISTICS

#### Comments on Tables 1 and 2

1. Different countries are not consistent in the age covered or the types of programs included in their definitions of "preschool." This makes it extremely difficult to compare countries or to put much store in totals. Despite changing definitions, programming, and rhetoric, official statistics still tend to be presented for the immediate preschool years, often leave out nonformal programs, and seldom include parental education programs, which are usually reported on separately.

The frequent omissions of child care and development programs with an educational component and of programs that cover children before the age of three or four is linked in part to bureaucratic divisions of responsibility and in part to a desire for continuity in statistical series based on the more traditional definition of preschooling. Note, for instance, that the figure of only 8 percent coverage for Trinidad and Tobago is for children aged three and four. There, five-year-olds have already been incorporated into the school system, so statistics are not reported. Nicaragua shows a coverage of 13 percent reporting for children aged three to six, whereas Cuba, with an 86 percent rate, reports only for children aged five. The comparison is very different if we use a 1990 figure for preschool enrollment only among children aged six in Nicaragua (the year prior to entering primary). In this case the coverage is estimated at 52 percent (UNICEF, Situation Analysis, 1992).

In Mexico, the figure of 62 percent coverage for children aged four and five is undoubtedly an overestimate because the way to calculate the figure is to take the total number of children in the second and third "levels" of preschool and divide by the number of children aged four and five in the population. Unfortunately, there are some children aged three and six and seven in these sections (apparently more than 10 percent of the total). If, therefore, the calculation were made using only the

actual number of children aged four and five in the system, the result would be to lower the coverage figure.

2. It is difficult to be precise about preschool coverage because an unknown number of children are enrolled in unregistered (hence uncounted) pre-schools established by private individuals or groups. Most countries can provide a statistic describing enrollment in private preschools, but without information on the extent to which that figure represents underreporting. In some countries, this phenomenon seems to be significant, but few systematic attempts have been made to determine the extent of the phenomenon in part, it appears, because the preschool level of education is not obligatory. In Uruguay, for instance, preschool coverage estimated by means of a household survey was found to be 10 percent higher than that reported in the official statistics (UNICEF/Uruguay, 1992).
3. Growth in coverage. Table 1 shows that the percentages reported for Bolivia, Chile, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Guyana dropped in the period from 1985 to 1991. A footnote to the table suggests that the Chilean drop may be false and related to the source and manner of reporting for 1985. Moreover, if one looks at the statistical information provided in UNESCO's Statistical Yearbook for 1994, all of the countries showing a drop in coverage according to the OREALC data are reported as showing at least small absolute increases in preschool enrollments during the period. According to the UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, 1994, the absolute enrollment in preschools reported for Bolivia between 1986 and 1990 increased slightly. Similarly, Chile's enrollment increased slightly between 1985 and 1991 (but dropped between 1988 and 1991). Absolute increases are also reported for Haiti (1987-90).
4. To obtain a clear picture of preschool coverage in each country, one needs to find up-to-date preschool figures disaggregated by age, major program types, gender, urban-rural location, and organizational responsibility (public-private; education; central-state-municipal). Until the countries of the region reach some agreement about the manner in which such statistics will be collected and

reported, general impressions about coverage and its distributions will have to suffice.

5. To gain insight into the urban-rural distribution, we used figures showing the number of preschool establishments in each country rather than the number of children enrolled

because total enrollments were not broken down into urban and rural categories in the figures provided. In a number of cases, the urban-rural distribution has been calculated by taking a ratio available from figures presented for an earlier year (1987 or 1988) and applying that ratio to more recent totals.

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