

Early Childhood Trends Around the World

by Roger Neugebauer

We asked members of the World Forum community to share their thoughts on early childhood trends around the world. Here is what they had to say. (Note: We received such an overwhelming response to our appeal for country input, that we have included in this article only abbreviated versions of most of the reports. To read the full reports from all countries that contributed, go to www.ChildCareExchange.com/ecetrends/.

■ Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia

Liana Ghent, International Step by Step Association, Budapest, Hungary

Under the educational system of former communist countries, the care and teaching of children 0-7 years was a service provided by governments in kindergarten financed and run by the state or by big enterprises. After the political and socio-economical system changed, many kindergartens either closed down or started charging parents significantly higher amounts for their services. All of the above has had the unfortunate effect of reducing access to child care and leaving it and school readiness in the hands of non-professionals in early childhood. The families that have been most affected by these changes are those with low socio-economic status, language differences, from rural areas, and with challenging personal issues.

In an attempt to improve the situation, in some countries a compulsory pre-school year has been introduced in primary schools. However it usually focuses largely on cognitive issues related to readiness for school. This year is not quality early childhood practice; moreover, it is not always accessible to children from disadvantaged families. Other problems include the high number of children in classrooms, and the fact that in some cases day care is viewed as a business and provided by private non-professional individuals.

■ Denmark

Helle Nebelong, Sensehaver, Gentofte, Denmark

Since 2004 it has been provided by statute that every day care centre in Denmark should work out teaching plans focusing on six themes: personal and social competences, language, body and motion, nature, and culture. In the teaching plans methods, activities and aims should be described. It is a part of the work of documentation of 0-6 year old children's learning and development. In 2005 the Ministry of Family and Consumer Affairs started an evaluation of the teaching plans. The first report from March 2006 shows high implementation. Seventy-four percent of all day care centres have already worked out a teaching plan

and 24% are in progress. Only 2% have not yet started.

Most of the nursery teachers express satisfaction with the plans and say that the plans help increase educational quality and professional consciousness, create a common language among the staff, and focus more on learning. The trend is that the idea of learning has moved into the day care centres without having moved out play.

■ The Netherlands

Betsy van de Grift, Partou Kinderopvang, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

The government considers child care as an integral and essential part of economic growth. Especially the fact that a large part of the working population is middle-aged makes it necessary that mothers with young children get the opportunity to participate in the economy and thus increase the economic wealth of the nation and their own emancipation.

Child care is used as a route to children who suffer from cultural and educational deprivation by working with programs such as Headstart, SureStart, and High/Scope. These programs are financed by the government and aim at fighting or preventing segregation within the peer groups. The method here is evidence-based and proves that

the child prospers from the education that is offered. Cooperation with the national educational system is essential.

■ Italy

Amelia Gambetti, Reggio Children, Reggio Emilia, Italy

Current early childhood trends in Italy:

- poor image of the child; children seen as empty containers to be filled
- low profile of teachers' professional development
- immigration and multiculturalism not seen as a resource, rather as a risk
- low trust and confidence in the Institutions (government, etc.) and lack of values in young generations
- country economic problems and subsequent drain of resources in early childhood services — risk of a poor quality of services, going back to early childhood education seen as assistance and care and not as educating communities
- anticipate lowering the age for first grade to 5 years (currently 6)

■ Turkey

Ebru Aktan Kerem, Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Canakkale, Turkey

In Turkey, the significance being attached to early childhood education is increasing day by day, activities on family consciousness are being performed, and the studies on the elevation of teacher training quality and the expansion of early childhood education are being carried out as well. Since in our country, particularly social purposes are influential in opening preschool education institutions, in regulations and acts by Ministries of Labor and Health (apart from Ministry of Education), it has been stated that preschool education is a special field. Thus in Turkey, Early Childhood Education General Management was founded within the Ministry of Education in 1992 to actualize the early childhood education studies in a more organized way and to meet the increasing need in society. Throughout Turkey,

present preschool enrollment rate is 32% for 5- to 6-year-old children. There are currently 552 kindergartens and 13,305 preschools in service.

■ Nepal

Kishor Shrestha, Tribhuvan University Kathmandu, Nepal

During the 11-year long armed conflict in Nepal, a large number of people living in rural and remote areas of the country migrated to the urban areas, mostly to the Terai (plain) areas. On one hand, the number of students in the schools in the hilly regions has dropped. In some schools there are more teachers than students. On the other hand, the number of students in the schools in the urban plain areas has increased disproportionately. A single classroom has to accommodate more than 200 students and be taken care of by a single teacher. This has led to a shortage of physical facilities and teachers and adversely affects the academic environment of the schools as well as the overall performance of the children. On top of that, the school authorities and teachers are not trained to deal with the psychological trauma the children are living with because of their exposure to different violent incidences during the conflict. Interestingly, even after the restoration of peace, people are not willing to return to their original places.

■ Vietnam

Nicole Knock, International School of Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Vietnam has a population of 80 million, of which 41% are children. Education has always been a major focus in Vietnam, but recently the focus is: regarding the quality of teacher training, increasing teacher wages (average salary \$18US/month), and providing better facilities and materials. Holistic child development and quality educational resources are being implemented in some educational institutions. They also want to implement a compulsory, one year of preschool education, prior to attending

the first year of primary education (6 years of age).

Since Vietnam has embraced market reform, more opportunities have been created for the country's children, especially from poor families in remote and mountainous regions, to receive access to health, education, and employment. Poverty, malnutrition, poor water quality, poor sanitation, and preventable accidents are prevalent, so there are many basic issues to tackle. In general, families in urban areas have more funds available to provide their children with better education, both in the public and increasing private sector.

■ Tajikistan

Ibod Sharifi, Coordinating Child Centre for International Development, Dushanbe, Tajikistan

Since its independence in 1991, Tajikistan has been experiencing a transition from centrally controlled economy to the free market economy following the outbreak of civil war in 1992-93. With such a rapid economic decline, the country's GDP is now only about 40% of its level prior to independence. Tajikistan ranks among the poorest countries in the world.

The education system in Tajikistan has gradually deteriorated due to lack of appropriate infrastructures/schools; lack of education equipment, education materials, and textbooks; brain drain; poor level of educator training and refresher courses for teachers; low payment (average \$10-15 per month); and lack of motivation of education and other sectors' workers who are responsible for child education and care and social support.

As a result, these and other barriers increase social exclusion of a growing number of children, a majority of which constitute girls, who lack access to compulsory primary and secondary education.

■ Singapore

Lily Wong, Advent Links-SAUC, Singapore

The demographic trends in Singapore are: delayed first marriage, decline in fertility rate, and staying single, which is due to the changing status of women with a higher educational level. The changing expectations of marriage are due to women no longer needing to marry for economic reasons. The changing value of child care and family life is due to lowered infant mortality, and thus a prevailing view of the "sacred," helpless, and precocious child and that child care is very time consuming.

The trend is having more child care options for working parents, to the tune of expanding infant and child care facilities to 3,000 centers by 2009. As of 2004 there were about 670 child care centers in Singapore with only 25 centers offering infant care services. More options will alleviate some of the burden on working women who are seeking professional care providers for their infants and children during the work-days.

■ Hong Kong

Maggie Koong, Victoria Kindergarten and Nursery, Hong Kong

Hong Kong is in the midst of a thorough education reform program that, having recognized early childhood as an integral part of education as the foundation of lifelong learning, and as the first stage of all-round development, is deeply affecting the pre-primary sector in several ways.

- It has called for the harmonization of early childhood services and this has provoked a paradigm shift towards integrated or coordinated ECEC systems leading to improvements in professional training, greater financial support, better monitoring, and less disparity between child care centers and kindergartens.
- The need to educate the new generations to be biliterate (Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese,

English, and Putonghua) is causing curriculum compression that has reached all the way down to preschools, which now have greater literacy and linguistic expectations for their students.

■ India

Reeta Sonawat, SNTD Women's University, Mumbai, India

India is a vast multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-religious country whose under five population is approximately 150 million children as of the 1991 census, constituting 17.5% of India's population. A large number of children live in an economic and social environment that impedes the child's physical and mental development. These conditions include poverty, poor environmental sanitation, disease and infection, inadequate access to primary health care, inappropriate child caring and feeding practices. The programme of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was launched in 1975 by the central Government seeking to provide an integrated package of services in a convergent manner for the holistic development of the child.

On the one hand, it is well known that although ICDS is impressive in its scope, aims, and reach, the quality of services are poor. On the other hand, in the private sector, although there are undoubtedly a few outstanding institutions doing wonderful work, the majority are inadequate. The state does not have anybody to describe standards and persons running centers to submit documents that they meet the standards and then the center is registered. The existence of centers for accreditation, which bring highest standards of quality in early childhood programmes, is out of the question. Globally India is being recognized as a nation whose time has come.

■ New Zealand

Toni Christie, Childspace, Wellington, New Zealand

In New Zealand early childhood is attracting a great deal more funding than ever before. The government has made provision for free ECE for up to 20 hours a week for 3 and 4 year olds from July 1, 2007. Funding is based on the number of qualified (degree trained) teachers as well as the number of children attending the service. Very soon at least half of all teachers in services will be required to be qualified, and by 2012 all teachers will be required to be qualified and registered. Our curriculum *Te Whariki* continues to be a guiding document for practice, and the recently released self-review guidelines are ensuring services are striving for continual improvement.

■ Jordan

Lara Hussein, The National Council for Family Affairs, Amman, Jordan

Jordan is amongst the first countries in the Region that developed an Early Childhood Development strategy (ECD) and a plan of action (2003-2007). The ECD Strategy has adopted a definition of early childhood that includes the period extending from pregnancy up to below nine years of child age. The ECD Strategy encompasses 14 themes covering a range of aspects aimed at providing children with protection and appropriate environment that enhance their growth and development. Since then, Jordan has witnessed a noticeable development in its policies and programmes relating to early childhood in the different sectors.

With regard to preschool education, the percentage of children enrolled in kindergartens (KG) (4-6 year-olds) has risen from 23% in 1990 to 29.4% in 2002, and reached 37.9% in 2005 (23.4% in KG1 and 51.5% in KG2). The total number of KGs increased from 545 in 1991 to 1595 in 2005, of which 70% is pro-

vided by the private sector, 15% by NGOs, and 15% by the public sector. The Ministry of Education (MOE) oversees the establishment and licensing of KGs, and establishes public KGs in disadvantaged and remote areas. In relation to developing the institutional capacity, a national KG interactive curriculum was developed in 2004 by the MOE and NCFE, was tested in the field, and an updated version will be printed for the next scholastic year. A curriculum framework is also under development.

■ Palestine

Ali Shaar, Save the Children Federation, Jerusalem, Palestine

General early childhood trends:

- Early childhood care and education programs are far from being comprehensive and coordinated; and the quality of these services is not evaluated, controversial, and in many aspects such as the qualifications of staff; physical and social environment; and existence of policies to govern the delivery of service is modest and not implemented in a structured manner.
- Only about 20% of children ages 3-6 are enrolled.
- Early education institutes are run by NGOs and private providers; the later enjoy better standards of quality, especially in large cities.
- Although huge investments have been allocated to support this sector, bureaucracy within the governmental sector, municipal system, and NGO sector hindered the ultimate utilization of early child care and education facilities.
- Lack of community mobilization and proper involvement of marginalized communities resulted in aggravated marginalization of the poorest children and most of the institutes created to serve the poor population end up being used by the higher class.

■ Egypt

Ahmed Al Damrawy, National Union for ECD, Cairo, Egypt

ECD is becoming important in Egypt as more women join the workforce and families need additional help with child care in the first years of the child's life. Recognizing the importance, Egypt has been seeking international support to invest more in early childhood education. Egypt, on the other hand, had made very strategic investments in the last couple decades that drastically brought down infant and child mortality rates. Basic education coverage stands at almost 100%, and the goal of universal primary education creates an urgent need for EC education to ensure that children from illiterate and isolated households can succeed in school, and the caring and education system can operate efficiently and effectively.

The great demand for kindergarten services has led schools to regulate the intake of children by increasing fees. One unfortunate consequence is that the neediest children who most benefit from the kindergarten are being excluded. The Government of Egypt, with support from the World Bank and later joined by Canadian International Development Agency and World Food Program, has been developing an EC national project to target children in the age of 4 and 5 years old. The five years project got rolling late in 2006 and is expected in a phasing approach to cover needy children in 18 governorates out of Egypt's 27 governorates.

■ Nigeria

Olasumbo S. Apanpa Ph.D., NERDC, Lagos, Nigeria

Early child care and development started in Nigeria in the '80s as part of the Survival strategy, and was linked to the Primary Health Care system, which was introduced to improve 1) the maternal health and wellbeing of

mothers, and 2) the under-5 mortality rate in the country. With mass immunisation, and subsequent drop in the under-5 mortality rate, parents were sensitised to take proper care of the health of their children under 5.

At the height of the Survival campaign was the call for early stimulation of the child to improve mental and physical development. To that end, with support from UNICEF, and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation in the Netherlands, a number of child care centres were established and linked to the Primary Health Care Centres in some communities in the country to take care of the need for early stimulation of the child aged 0-5 years.

Early child care and development is now widely practised in the country, and with the Dakar Declaration on Education for All (2000), Early Childcare and Development was to be expanded to make it universal. With the new National Policy on Education, early child care and development was no longer to be solely in private hands, but was to have the active participation of the government at all levels. Also with active participation of NGOs Community-Based Organisation in order to universalise the delivery of Early Childhood Development in Nigeria and to benefit many Nigerian children who hitherto could not benefit from early stimulation and learning.

■ Sub-Saharan Africa

Emily Vargas-Baron, The Rise Institute, Washington, DC

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the major challenges to good child development are disease, severe malnutrition, and developmental delays. Wars, famine, poverty, migration, domestic violence, and a lack of basic social services have all taken their toll on vulnerable children. Increasingly, African nations are formulating ECD policies with strategies to develop integrated commu-

nity-based programs that provide parent education and support, child stimulation, preschool education, health care, nutritional supplements, community sanitation, potable water, and protective services. Vulnerable children in Africa urgently require more intensive and higher quality services to reach their potential. For this reason, special attention must be paid to formulating and implementing ECD policies, increasing national and international investment in ECD, establishing effective national ECD resource centers, building pre- and in-service training systems, and forging public-private partnerships for children and parents.

■ Kenya

Henry Manani, Kenya Institute of Education, Nairobi, Kenya

Kenya has greatly been affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which was declared a national disaster by the President in 1998. All Government organs have developed various mechanisms and interventions to control the menace.

HIV/AIDS pandemic has affected the education sector in various aspects:

- Kenya children population in primary schools is 7.5 million, of which over 900,000 are orphans. At secondary level we have over 120,000 orphans.
- A big percentage of the children affected spend a lot of learning time taking care of the sick family members, hence affecting their class performance. There are increased drop out cases thus affecting EFA goals.
- The number of teachers dying is increasing rapidly while others are too sick to work, thus denying the education sector of vital skilled teachers.

■ South Africa

Juliana Seleti, Early Childhood Development Directorate, Pretoria, South Africa

South Africa has over the last 12 years experienced significant transformation in the field of ECD. Most of the transformation has occurred in the area of policy development across the different sectors and government departments that deal with programmes and services for children. Various government and non government collaborations and partnerships at different levels over the years have led to the production of different policies that are currently influencing ECD trends in the country. The long policy development process in ECD was a result of the need to redress the Apartheid government ECD status, which had very few and discriminatory policies and regulations in place for children. The new ECD policies together with other relevant political and economic frameworks have influenced the ECD trends in the country that are leaning towards:

- Supporting and strengthening families and communities as primary caregivers and educators of young children. Different programmes and services are in place through various providers, addressing particularly the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children, especially those affected and infected by HIV and AIDS.
- Poverty alleviation through job creation in the ECD sector, and increasing access to quality and equal ECD services, as well as provisioning of Social grants and subsidies.

■ Bolivia

Roxana Salazar, National Council of Women, La Paz, Bolivia

In Bolivia, 58% of children between one month and six years of age live under poverty conditions, at risk to die or to get an avoidable disease due to high rates of malnutrition, low access to basic services, and lack of education and early care and stimulation. Only four of every 100 kids have access to integral attention, and only 16 of every 100 kids between 4 to 6 years old attend a

preschool centre. In addition, there is a wide cultural and socio-economic diversity in the Bolivian population. This topic is not a priority for government, society, not even families. The challenge is enormous, but not impossible. The answer must contain an integrated answer. And that means education. It includes searching strategies and initiatives to achieve equity and to promote a unique childhood development culture across the diversity of cultures.

■ Peru

Martha Llanos, Human Development Specialist, Lima, Peru

Peruvian early childhood education is facing great challenges. In the early '70s Educational Reform had a very special recognition and was considered a Directorate within the Ministry of Education. Emphasis was placed in development of different models for the education and care of younger children. In the '90s it was cancelled as a Directorate and joined with the Primary Education; then the overall number of children attending was diminishing and also the quality of the programmes was a main issue of concern. In 2006 a major event took place because after 16 years it was again recognized as a main Directorate.

The current situation of Peruvian children is very critical. Levels of malnutrition and lack of facilities for the number of small children, especially below three years of age, is a focus of attention. Special concerns are the children in rural areas and the indigenous children; emphasis is currently ongoing in the area of research and finding methodologies for appropriate intercultural bilingual education. There are quite a variety of creative small scale programmes promoting play, libraries, open spaces for development, child to child, and many more.

■ México

Ivan Galindo, Instituto High/Scope México, Queretaro, México

The general trend in basic education in México, for maybe six decades, has been incrementing coverage of the population. Up to 1993 universal education was only six years (primary school); some secondary (middle schools) existed but they did not pretend to cover the whole population. Starting in 1993, secondary school is compulsory for any child in México. Since 2005, one year of preschool is obligatory and for 2008, three years of preschool will be obligatory for all children in México. Coverage in general is around 65% in preschool (3-5 years), 92.9% in primary school (6-12 years), and 88.2% in secondary school (13-15 years) for a total population of 104 million. Preschool coverage should inch up to more than 90% in the next four years. This may imply overpopulation in many school buildings.

To improve quality the government has changed programs in preschool to emphasize competences and more “constructivist” style of learning in classrooms. In addition, this program promotes a more open, reflective, flexible, and creative practice from teachers. Nevertheless, the implementation of these new programs is far from satisfactory. There is a huge gap between intention and implementation. There is a great lack of good training and capacity building for teachers on the job. It is easier to change education on paper than changing 200,000 preschool teachers.

■ Haiti

Carolyn Hudicourt, Step by Step, Petionville, Haiti

Institutions offering educational services for early childhood have spread throughout the country during the last 10 to 15 years: In urban areas, 53% of the children attend preschool programs and 47% in rural areas. About half of school-age children in Haiti do have a chance to go to school, and 55% of the adult population is illiterate. Although 70% of the people live in rural areas, only 20% of the educational funds go to rural areas.

Part of the reason for the recent spread of preschool programs in Haiti is the entrance examination of elementary programs which favor children who have already received some degree of formal education. The tendency of these programs is to function like small schools in which small children start learning the basics. It is common for toys to be completely absent from these settings.

■ Canada

Dr. Laurie McNelles, Mothercraft, Toronto, Canada

In Canada, municipal, regional, and federal governments vary in their commitments to early care and education. The Canadian federal government has chosen to put early care dollars directly in the hands of parents in the form of \$100 per month for each child under 6 years of age. Many municipal and regional governments have questioned this approach to a universal commitment to Canadian children, preferring to invest in strong community networks for children and families that include community programming and child care services.

Most regions in Canada are concerned with increasing the level of professionalism associated with the care and education of young children. Many regions in Canada are experiencing a shortage of qualified early care and education professionals. Predictably, some of these shortages are associated with low wages and poor benefit packages offered throughout early care and education. In addition, these shortages are also related to specific cultural considerations as ethno-cultural groups build their internal capacity to meet the early care and education needs of children within their communities.