



Jordan's Strategies for Early Childhood Education in a Lifelong Learning Framework

Introduction

Jordan has been paying increased attention to early childhood education in recent years. In particular, the government allocated unprecedented resources to the sector through its Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy (ERfKE) 2003/08.¹ Funded by the World Bank and other donor agencies, ERfKE is designed to revamp the education sector starting from early childhood in the framework of lifelong learning with a view to increasing Jordan's competitiveness in the knowledge economy. This brief will explore the government's growing interest in early childhood education and discuss some of its strategies for improving the subsector through ERfKE.

Why pay more attention to early childhood education?

Kindergarten education, though voluntary, is part of the formal education system in Jordan, where kindergartens cater to children ages 4-6 and are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Kindergartens function 25 hours per week, 35 weeks per year. They are fee-paying except in government-run public institutions. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) of children in kindergartens was 37.9% in 2004/2005², of whom 95% attended private facilities. Nurseries serving children ages 0-4 are under the Ministry of Social Development. Only 1.7% of children of this age group are in nurseries.³

In a wider context, while Jordan's pre-primary education GER is higher than the average for the Arab States (16%) and the world average (37%), it is lower than the average for East Asia and the Pacific of 39% and the average for developed countries of 77%. On the other hand, Jordan's proportion of private enrolment in pre-primary education is greater than the average for the Arab States (76%) and more than double Latin America's 44%.⁴

The stepped-up attention to early childhood education stems first of all from stronger public awareness of the importance of quality early childhood in children's learning and development. Second, social inequity is a serious concern in Jordan, and there is a growing recognition that an effective way to combat inequities is to offer a very early start in lifelong learning, particularly through early intervention with disadvantaged children. The royal family's support for disadvantaged children

since 1999 has helped to build consensus on the need to prioritise services to this group of children.⁵

Strategies for early childhood education under ERfKE

Promoting learning readiness through early childhood education is one of the four components of ERfKE, emphasising the expansion of quality kindergarten education to enhance children's readiness for primary education. This component aims to contribute to attaining the targets defined in the Jordanian National Plan for Children (2004/13): overall kindergarten enrolment of 47% by 2007, and in particular 50% enrolment of 4-year-olds and 70% enrolment of 5-year-olds by 2013.

This component's four action areas are: (1) establishing a kindergarten curriculum, licensing standards and an instrument to assess learning readiness; (2) developing training and occupational standards for kindergarten teachers and administrators; (3) expanding access for the poor by creating public kindergartens; and (4) providing education to increase parents' understanding of the importance of quality early childhood experiences and awareness of their role as children's first educators.

Discussion: focus on kindergarten education

ERfKE focuses primarily on kindergarten education, i.e., the two years preceding primary education, which are within the purview of the Ministry of Education. This focus, starting at age 4 instead of at birth, seems at odds with the lifelong learning framework in which the whole reform programme was conceived. It also seems to pay insufficient heed to scientific research findings showing that major brain development occurs in the first few years of life, pointing to the need to invest in the earliest years.

ERfKE's attention to kindergarten education is a realistic strategy. Pre-primary education is a natural and cost-effective entry point for the education sector to begin involvement in early childhood.⁶ Also, it is a timely policy decision, given that Jordan has already attained fairly equitable, high enrolment rates in primary (net enrolment rate of 91% in 2004) and secondary education (81%). The Ministry is now ready to accelerate its efforts downwards – step by step – with a long-term goal of building a system in which lifelong learning is a reality.

¹ ERfKE 2003-8 is referred to as ERfKE1. Currently, another 5-year programme of ERfKE (ERfKE2) is being prepared.

² Jordan Ministry of Education data. In 2001/2, the GER was 29.4%.

³ Jordan country profile prepared by the EFA Global Monitoring Report (2006): <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001472/147215e.pdf>.

⁴ 2004 figures in the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007.

⁵ Interview with Dr. Tayseer Al-Nahar, Secretary-General for Technical Affairs of the Ministry of Education, conducted by Ms. Soo-Hyang Choi.

⁶ See UNESCO Policy Brief No. 31. March-April, 2006, "Pre-primary Education: The valid investment option for EFA".

In addition to its main focus on kindergarten education, ERfKE provides for the care and education of the younger age group through parenting education, an intersectoral initiative involving many national and local partners which aims to ameliorate the home environment for children up to age 8. Moreover, the Ministry of Education is a member of a steering committee, set up in January 2006, which jointly examines and defines ways to improve the quality of nurseries with the Ministry of Social Development. These are positive, incremental efforts made by the education sector in support of the entire early childhood age group.

Discussion: new responsibilities for the education sector

Increased involvement in early childhood is essential to the goal of revamping the education system to place it within a lifelong learning framework. The growing emphasis on quality education to serve the knowledge economy is another argument for increasing the education sector's responsibility for the early years. For its part, the social sector, given the relatively low female labour participation rate in Jordan, is not under pressure to become involved in the early childhood field.

Indications are that the Ministry of Education will have chief responsibility for early childhood in the coming years. For this reason, it may need to pay more attention to the *systemic development* of early childhood than it does at present, in order to embrace the entire age group, beginning at birth, in a coherent system of services. For example, the Ministry could define, at the policy level, the services through which the care and education needs of different age groups will be catered for *and* the division of work among different ministries for the different services.

Discussion: focus on public provision for the poor

A cornerstone of ERfEK's strategy for early childhood is the public provision of kindergarten education for the poor. Specifically, the plan aims to open 60 new kindergarten classes each year, providing the children with free education, meals and warm clothing.⁷

The decision to provide such public services contrasts with the overriding trend in the developing world of increased access through private provision. Indeed, many developing countries delegate responsibility for provision to the private sector to avoid the costs of developing and maintaining public services. The private enrolment rate in pre-primary education grew from 52% in 1998/99 to 54% in 2004 in developing countries.⁸ Even in countries with fewer financial constraints, governments tend to provide subsidies to private providers or families rather than create public services. This policy may be less costly to governments while quickly expanding the pool of providers, but it tends to focus on middle-class and affluent families.

In contrast, Jordan's provision strategy favours poor families. It offers *free* services in poor and remote areas, guarantees the availability of services where private providers would not be motivated to operate, facilitates the expansion of access by assuring *optimal* quality, and provides free meals and warm clothes, which can help poor families immensely.

Conclusions

A broad holistic approach to the early childhood sector by the Ministry of Education will mean not placing the educational function of early childhood services ahead of care and social functions. A partnership approach with other ministries and stakeholders can ensure proper attention to these functions. An important pre-requisite for successful pre-primary education is to ensure that children's holistic development is valued and practised.

Such an approach will be more appropriate for the families and young children whom the system serves. Furthermore, a clearly defined overall service structure and division of ministerial responsibilities may prompt other sectors, particularly the Ministry of Social Development, to phase in the provision of services for the 0-4 age group that is currently not prioritised under ERfKE.

Jordan's provision strategy in favour of poor children is both equitable and well-conceptualised. Since research shows that disadvantaged children benefit most from quality early childhood intervention, the reform's emphasis on support for poor children in accessing quality services is particularly valid. Furthermore, Jordan's policy in favour of regulatory mechanisms (e.g., licensing, curriculum, training and occupational standards) to be applied to all services is an indication of its concern to ensure the quality of both public and private provision.

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⁷ The number of public kindergarten classes increased from 15 in 1999 to 405 in 2007, according to the National Council for Family Affairs, Jordan.

⁸ The EFA Global Monitoring Report (2006).

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