

Starting School: Who is Prepared? Young Lives' Research on Children's Transition to First Grade in Peru

Patricia Ames, Vanessa Rojas and Tamia Portugal



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A growing body of research highlights the importance of children's experiences during their first grade in school as a foundation for success during subsequent school years. The transition to first grade seems to be key to this process since children who adapt to first grade better tend to perform better at school in following years. Despite this evidence, there has been little research within Latin America in general and in Peru in particular regarding the transition to first grade. Previous studies in Peru show that children's educational outcomes in first grade are closely linked to their pre-school experiences. Studies have also revealed cultural discontinuities in Peruvian children's experiences between home and school in culturally diverse contexts. More research is now needed to better understand children's experiences when starting school, due to the importance of this for their school trajectory and their overall development.

Background

In Peru, the overall enrolment rate is almost universal for primary education but is significantly lower for pre-school. Moreover, recent debates question the quality of educational provision and its outcomes. While a number of government programmes have recently been created on early childhood care, access to these services is still very limited. The educational and policy agenda has recommended specific measures, such as special training for pre-school and primary school teachers, but these measures have not yet been implemented.

Recent understandings of childhood transitions ask not just how ready children are for school, but how ready schools are for children. School preparation depends on factors such as availability and access to education, teacher training for transitions and school resources. It is also increasingly agreed that to achieve quality services for early childhood education and care, it is necessary to involve parents and communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of these services. The attitudes of parents and communities towards early schooling and the information parents receive about their children's transitions are of key

importance. Children's experiences of their own transitions must also be understood and taken into account, specifically their comparisons between pre-school and primary school, their perspectives on other activities outside school, and their likes and dislikes.

Methodology

This paper examines the following questions relating to transition to first grade in Peru: a) how well prepared are pre-schools, primary schools and their teachers to facilitate the transition; b) how much information do parents have about this process and what are their perspectives; and c) in what ways do children experience this transition. The paper also looks at different experiences of transition in urban and rural contexts, in indigenous and non-indigenous settings, and in terms of gender.

Findings

The findings presented here are from Young Lives' research with children in four districts in Peru. They show some positive signs at the institutional level, with increasing enrolment in pre-school and better access to educational services in both rural and urban areas. Within schools, however, there is weak coordination between pre-school and primary school teachers, lack of continuity in classroom environments, lack of specialised teacher training on transitions, and no provisions for children without pre-school experience. Schools are not making a conscious effort to welcome students and ease the many changes that they will face. On the other hand, the findings show positive attitudes amongst parents towards education, and a growing consensus on the importance of pre-school. Most children have had pre-school experience, although it varies in length.

Children themselves face the main burden of adaptation, but show a very positive attitude and capacity to cope with the transition to first grade. Much more attention is now needed from policy makers and educators to take advantage of the positive attitudes emerging from parents and children.

