

Pathways through Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia, India and Peru: Rights, Equity and Diversity

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The earliest years of a child's life represent a crucial period of growth and change. In recent years, research has underscored the need to prioritise early childhood care and education (ECCE) services. Studies show that poverty and other disadvantages experienced during early childhood can greatly affect a child's development, while well-planned interventions can have long-lasting benefits. Programmes thus increasingly focus on early childhood care and education as an important pro-poor strategy, underlining the principle that all children have a right to development and to education in their best interests, without discrimination. There is growing global recognition of the potential of early education to improve and change young lives. The key question is how far this potential is being translated into reality, through positive early childhood policies in practice.

Young Lives findings confirm global evidence of rapid growth in early education opportunities. This paper discusses some of the major issues facing young children and their families in three Young Lives study countries: Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), and Peru. These countries highlight the challenges faced in diverse contexts. In Ethiopia, primary education is still being consolidated, and pre-school is almost entirely restricted to urban children. Peru offers a very different story, with a well-established government primary and pre-school system, but concerns about quality and coordination between sectors. Andhra Pradesh offers the most complex set of challenges, with a long-established government system of ECCE but increasing use of private services, including among the poorest communities.

The paper provides case-studies of children from the three countries to illustrate Young Lives findings. Ethiopia has made rapid progress towards achieving universal enrolment and gender parity at the primary school level. But current public spending in Ethiopia is insufficient to ensure even basic resources for primary schools, especially in many isolated communities. To help fill the vacuum at the pre-school level, the government is encouraging the involvement of other partners, including the private sector. Private pre-schools are the main option for all children in Ethiopia, but access to such schools strongly favours children from more advantaged families. In Peru, early education has been a high priority for government since 1972, and the country today has almost achieved universal primary education provision. But despite the

high overall levels of early education, the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children are at risk of being excluded. Young Lives data show that almost a third of children from the poorest households have no experience with pre-school, in contrast to the near universal attendance of children from better-off families. There are also important discrepancies between urban and rural children, with a much greater number of rural children not participating in government-run pre-schools. In Andhra Pradesh, there has been a substantial increase in primary school enrolment in the last decade, although the goal of universal enrolment remains elusive. Enrolment in private schools has grown particularly rapidly, but at the expense of enrolment in government schools. Young Lives findings suggest that young children in Andhra Pradesh experience very early differentiation in their experiences and education opportunities, which are strongly shaped by factors such as where they live and their household poverty levels.

Ethiopia, Peru, and Andhra Pradesh represent very different economic, political and cultural contexts, with different educational traditions and varying levels of progress towards the goal of universal primary education. But all three countries are faced with issues of equity, with the poorest children least likely to have access to high-quality early education and primary education. Furthermore, Young Lives research shows that new inequalities are emerging *within* poverty groups, suggesting increased differentiation for children as they grow older.

The paper offers five broad conclusions, about the importance of: (i) ensuring quality and equity in early education; (ii) better coordinated pre-school and school systems; (iii) targeting the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children; (iv) recognising the full range of equity issues; and (v) ensuring more effective governance, including governance of the private sector.

