

How Far is Early Education Achieving the Dakar Goals? Young Lives Evidence from Four Countries

Martin Woodhead

“In my daughter’s kindergarten, the quality of education was good but ...other kindergartens have a large number of children in a single class (40 to 50 per teacher)... and there is a shortage of toys and other play materials” (*Young Lives parent, Ethiopia*)

“[In the primary school]...it’s like she’s on her own, not like in pre-school, it’s completely different, In pre-school they took care of her, they looked after her” (*Young Lives parent, Peru*)

“[The village primary school] is not at all good... the teachers are not good. We just sent the children so that they get used to the (school) routine... We are ready to spend... we want him to study well... that is why we send him [to private school]” (*Young Lives parent, Andhra Pradesh, India*)

Early education for all?

Much progress has been made towards the MDG target of universal primary education. But the limitation of focussing on primary education access alone is widely recognised, unless this is linked to ensuring quality and positive outcomes. At the same time, policy debates have been drawn to another question, whether starting school at 5, 6 or 7 years old is already too late as a pro-poor strategy? By the time most children start school, their most formative years are already past, and poverty-linked ability gaps are already well established. Bearing this in mind, inability to access pre-school education is ‘Zone of Exclusion 0’ according to the model proposed by Lewin (2007).

The Dakar Framework for Action prioritised early childhood, as Goal 1:

Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education (ECCE), especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
(World Education Forum, Dakar, 26-28 April 2000)

The scientific case for ECCE has been endorsed by leading development economists (notably Heckman 2006), in turn drawing on robust evaluation data demonstrating long-term outcomes of early intervention (reviewed by Engle 2007). Yet, despite rapid global expansion, inability to access such programmes adds to the multiple disadvantages of the poorest groups in many country contexts, especially in rural locations (UNESCO 2006).

Evidence on these issues is now available from the Young Lives project in Ethiopia, India (in the state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam. In this short paper, we draw attention to the challenges of ensuring that early childhood programmes live up to their promise as a pro-poor strategy, faced with inequalities of access to quality

programmes, and the implications in some countries of a growing private sector. This note draws on evidence from: (i) Round 2 of the longitudinal survey (in 2006/7) involving 2,000 younger cohort children in each country, aged 5-6 years, and focussing especially on issues of access, equity and quality. Qualitative studies have also been carried out with a sub-sample of children making the transition to primary school, drawing attention to the role of ECCE as a gateway to divergent (and unequal) pathways and outcomes, (Woodhead et al. forthcoming).

Equal access?

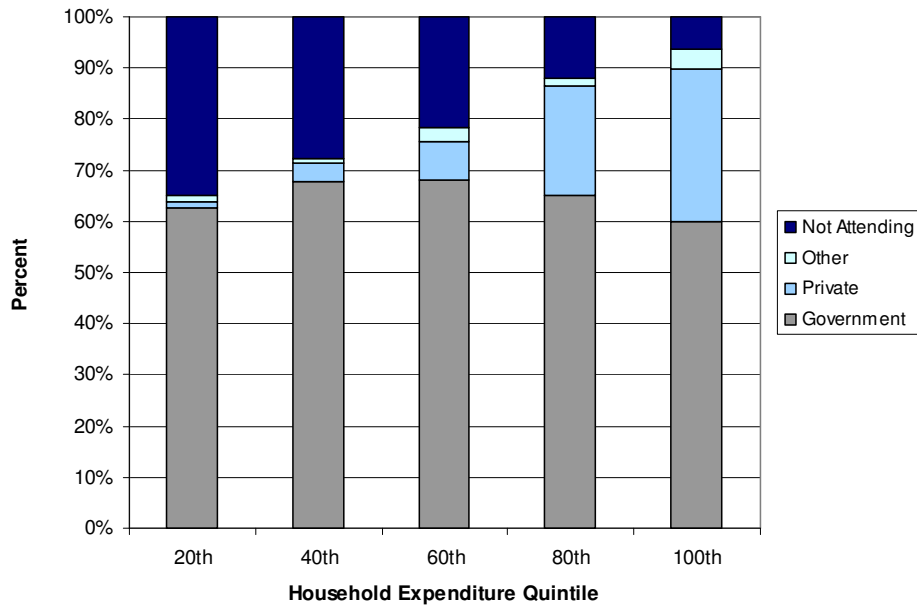
Young Lives data confirms evidence of rapid progress towards achieving the first element of Dakar Goal 1 (expanding ECCE). Young Lives 5-6 year olds were reported as having attended pre-school at some point since their third birthday by 94% of their caregivers in Vietnam, 87% in Andhra Pradesh, and 84% in Peru, with very little difference in overall participation rates for girls and boys at this stage of their education. It is only in Ethiopia that pre-school is a minority experience (just 25% of the sample), which is not surprising given that the policy priority (and substantial achievement) has been in expansion of basic primary education (UNESCO 2007). Again, the gender imbalance favours boys, but only by 2%.

Despite these encouraging statistics, it is far less certain that the second element of Dakar Goal 1 is being achieved, i.e. targeting '...the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children' especially with quality ECCE programmes. For all four Young Lives countries, the most disadvantaged children are less likely to have attended pre-school at some point since their third birthday. In terms of overall levels of access, equity appears closest to being achieved in both India and Vietnam, with a differential of less than 10% between the poorest households and the least poor households. This compares with a 25% difference in access in Peru, and 50% in Ethiopia. Another way to look at these differentials is in relation to parent education levels. Thus, amongst the Peru sample, virtually all children with highly educated mothers (more than 10 years of school) have attended pre-school, whereas over 30% of children whose mothers have low levels of education (0 to 4 years) will have begun first grade without any experience of a pre-school programme, which risks perpetuating intergenerational poverty and inequalities.

Different opportunities?

These overall statistics are deceptive. They take no account of the variable quality of ECCE and they disguise important differences in opportunity, linked especially to young children's location (urban versus rural) and the type of pre-school they attend (public versus private). Figure 1 highlights that for rural children in Peru, access to government pre-schools is relatively high and evenly distributed, (available to between 60-70% of children across all five poverty groups*). It is mainly the private sector that accounts for inequalities in access favouring the more advantaged households. In urban settings, access to government pre-schools is higher for the poorest groups (80-90%) than for the less poor groups who are much more likely to opt for private pre-schools.

Figure 1. Attendance by pre-school type and poverty levels for Young Lives rural sample in Peru*



*Poverty is based on an index of household expenditure from Young Lives data and calculated as the sum of the estimated value (approximated to the past 30 days), of food (bought + home grown + gifts/transfers) and non-food items (excluding durables such as furniture, gold jewellery and one-off expenditure). This monthly figure is then divided by household size.

Public or private?

The picture is more complex in Andhra Pradesh (India), mainly because private kindergartens are becoming such a significant service provider, even among many of the poorest families in the Young Lives sample. Andhra Pradesh has a long-established publicly funded early childhood system, based on *anganwadi* centres, established under the umbrella of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and aiming to offer immunisation, growth monitoring, health and referral services, as well as pre-school education to even the most remote communities.

Figure 2 highlights the continuing significance of these *anganwadis* for children in rural communities, where patterns of take-up favour the poorest households. It is only for some more advantaged groups that private pre-schools are an important option, accounting for 31% of the children in the 'least poor' group. But the picture in urban Andhra Pradesh is strikingly different (Figure 3), with private pre-schools the major option chosen by parents. Poverty levels are strongly predictive of whether children attend private pre-school education, but a surprising 34% of the poorest households are opting for a private pre-school, compared with 46% attending public pre-schools.

Figure 2. Attendance by pre-school type and poverty levels (rural sample, Andhra Pradesh)

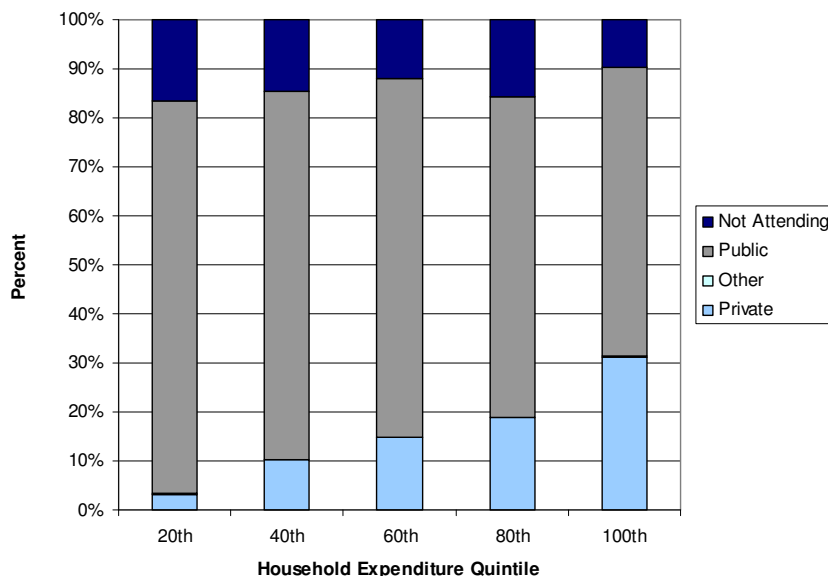
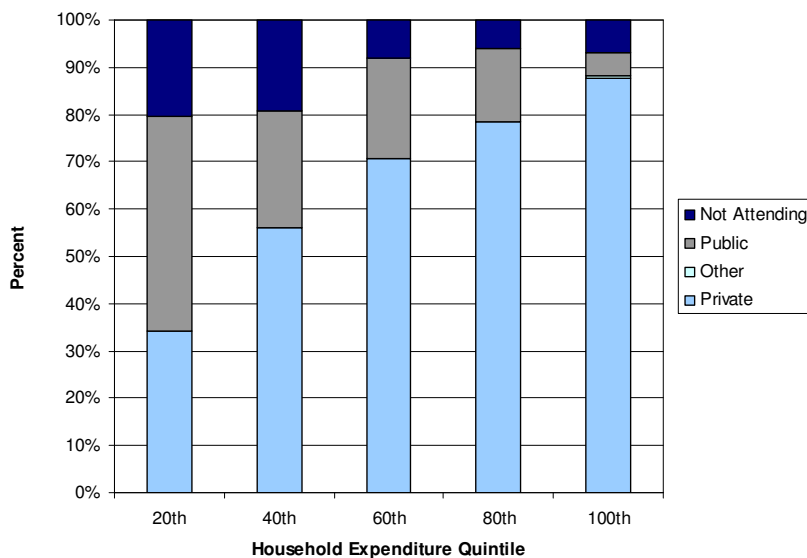


Figure 3. Attendance by pre-school type and poverty levels (urban sample, Andhra Pradesh)



Selective enrolment in private kindergartens is also linked to gender differentiation, with girls more likely to be educated within the government sector and expected to leave school earlier than their brothers. Evidence for these different trajectories comes from the Young Lives older cohort (12-year-olds), with 10% more boys than girls enrolled in private schools, and 68% of boys anticipating university education, compared with 54% of girls (and only 42% of girls' caregivers).

One of the major motives for early education choice in Andhra Pradesh is that most private schools offer English as the medium of instruction, tantalising parents with the

prospect of opening doors to children's participation in the new global labour market. By contrast, teaching in government primary schools is traditionally Telegu-medium, although that policy is currently under review.

One of the most striking findings emerging from Young Lives data in Andhra Pradesh is that mothers of children attending private pre-school in Andhra Pradesh have higher levels of education, and higher expectations for their children's education, irrespective of household poverty level. And children who have attended private pre-school obtained higher scores on an indicator of verbal skills (the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, PPVT) than children who have attended public pre-schools.

Quality and inequalities?

The Round 2 survey was not able to make an independent assessment of the quality of the pre-schools attended by Younger Cohort children. But Young Lives qualitative sub-studies draw attention to the huge variation in buildings, resources, care and teaching at pre-school with the poorest pre-schools very poor indeed, by any standards, (Woodhead et al. forthcoming).

Some indicative evidence on quality is available for the full sample from caregivers' answers to the question: 'In your opinion, how good is the quality of the care and teaching at this pre-school?' In both Peru and Andhra Pradesh, a higher percentage of caregivers using private schools judged them to be 'good' or 'excellent' than did caregivers judging their children's public pre-schools. These judgements are very likely shaped by private education users' financial investment in their children's schooling. But one highly significant finding for Andhra Pradesh is that differences in quality judgements between public and private pre-school users is greatest amongst the poorest quintile, with less than 50% judging the public *anganwadi* their child attends to be good or excellent, compared with over 90% of private kindergarten users. This finding is also consistent with national reports into the shortcomings of *anganwadis* (FOCUS 2006). Another suggestive finding centres on 123 of the Young Lives children who had attended more than one pre-school since the age of three, 80% of whom had been moved from a government to a private pre-school.

These findings point to the emergence of new inequalities *within* poverty groups, between those with – and those without – a personal and economic resources and opportunities sufficient to make educational choices, that parents calculate will result in improved outcomes and long-term social mobility. Despite the evident benefits to some children, the consequence seems likely to be increased differentiation in children's trajectories within households, and within communities, within inevitable risk of increased long-term inequality. If EFA goals are to be realised – *for all* – then improving quality of public pre-school and primary schools becomes a high policy priority.

Ready for school?

Most of the 2,000 younger cohort children in each Young Lives country are now in the early grades of primary school, or will soon begin school. A few may delay entry or not be enrolled at all. Others will already have switched schools as their parents migrate or seek better opportunities for their children. Young Lives longitudinal design offers a rare opportunity to study these processes. Plans for Round 3 data collection (in 2009) include following-up in detail on diverse school transitions, tracking children's progress (or otherwise), including school experiences and aspirations, as well as evidence of grade repetition, and drop-out. Initial outcomes data will also be collected, on numeracy and literacy skills. Finally, plans include linking access and outcomes data to (crucially important) assessments of school quality.

Summary

- Quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes are widely recognised as having potential to enhance transition to school and improve outcomes for children in poverty.
- Young Lives data confirms rapid growth in access to ECCE, with over 80% of children having some pre-school experience in India, Peru and Vietnam.
- The poorest groups in the sample tend to be under-represented, especially in Peru and Ethiopia. In some countries, rural children are also at a disadvantage.
- The private sector plays a significant role in shaping patterns of access, especially in urban communities, enhancing advantages of less poor households.
- In Andhra Pradesh (India) private pre-schools are the major option chosen by parents, including 34% of the poorest households in urban areas. Children who have attended private pre-schools obtained higher scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, across all poverty levels.
- Indicative evidence on quality comes from parental judgements, which favoured private over public ECCE in Andhra Pradesh, and point to the risk of increasing differentiation according to how far households are able to access quality programmes.

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