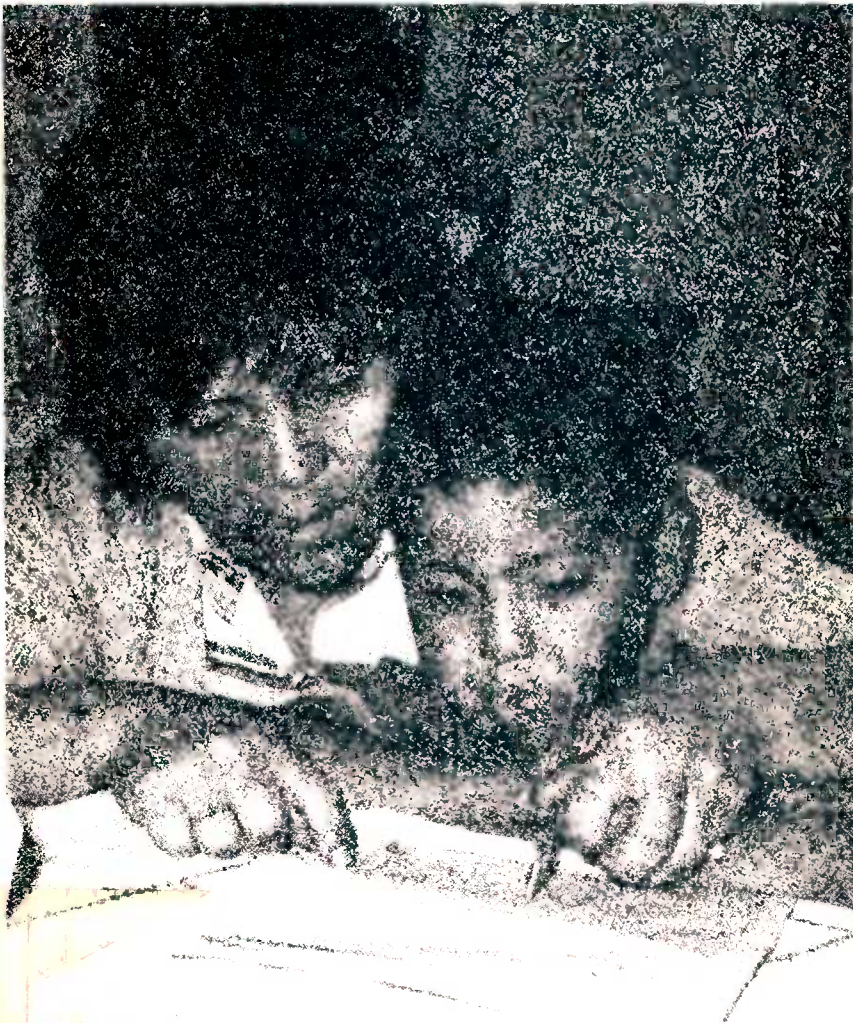


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# Preventing School Failure:

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*The Relationship Between  
Preschool and Primary Education*



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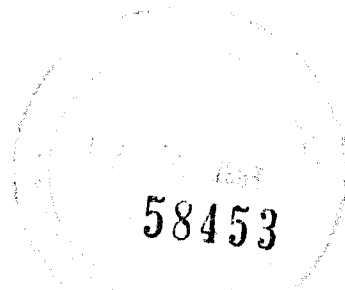
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# **Preventing School Failure: The Relationship Between Preschool and Primary Education**

**Proceedings of a workshop on preschool research  
held in Bogota, Colombia, 26-29 May 1981**



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## **Résumé**

Cette publication contient les exposés présentés au cours d'un séminaire sur la relation entre l'éducation préscolaire et primaire qui a été tenu à Bogota, Colombie, en mai 1981, sous les auspices du CRDI et de la Fondation Ford. Le séminaire a réuni des chercheurs en éducation préscolaire venus de diverses régions du monde et spécialisés dans différentes disciplines. L'éveil précoce des enfants fut examiné à la lumière des études de cas et des programmes nationaux présentés, et analysé en fonction des effets à court et à long terme qu'il peut avoir sur le développement de l'enfant et son succès lors de son entrée dans le système scolaire. Les travaux sont groupés sous trois grands thèmes : recherche et action en éducation préscolaire et primaire; considérations sur le problème de l'éducation préscolaire et primaire; et discussions et recommandations générales.

## **Resumen**

Esta publicación contiene las ponencias presentadas en un seminario sobre la relación entre educación preescolar y primaria, celebrado en Bogotá, Colombia, en mayo de 1981 bajo los auspicios del CIID y la Fundación Ford. El seminario reunió a investigadores de la educación preescolar procedentes de diversas regiones del mundo y con diferentes formaciones disciplinarias. La estimulación infantil temprana fue vista a la luz de los estudios de caso y los programas nacionales presentados, y analizada en función de los efectos que a corto o largo plazo puede tener sobre el desarrollo del niño y su éxito al ingresar al sistema educativo formal. Tres amplias secciones agrupan los trabajos de acuerdo con los temas tratados: investigación y acción en educación preescolar y primaria; consideraciones sobre la problemática preescolar y primaria; y discusiones y recomendaciones generales.

## Contents

**Preface 5**

**Participants 7**

**Introduction 9**

**Acknowledgments 10**

### **Part I: Research and Action in Preschool and Primary Education**

#### **Introduction 12**

Development of intervention strategies for young children in Jamaica  
**Sally M. Grantham-McGregor 13**

Pilot program of early stimulation: follow-up of children at six years of age  
**Sonia Bralic E. 20**

Psychosocial stimulation and complementary nourishment during the first three years: its repercussions on scholastic achievement  
**Nelson Ortiz P. 29**

Primary school progress after preschool experience: troublesome issues in the conduct of follow-up research and findings from the Cali, Colombia study  
**Arlene McKay and Harrison McKay 36**

Lasting effects of preschool education on children from low-income families in the United States  
**John R. Berrueta-Clement, Lawrence J. Schweinhart, and David P. Weikart 42**

Early childhood education in Brazil: trends and issues  
**María Carmen Capelo Feijó 52**

Relationship between preprimary and grade one primary education in state schools in Chile  
**Johanna Filp, Sebastián Donoso, Cecilia Cardemil, Eleonor Dieguez, Jaime Torres, and Ernesto Schiefelbein 58**

Relationship between preschool education and first grade in Argentina  
**Pilar Pozner 73**

Education and social class formation: the case of preschool education in Kenya  
**O.N. Gakuru 85**

Fostering readiness for primary grades: innovative action programs with municipal schools in India  
**Veena R. Mistry 93**

Preschool services in Thailand  
**Nittaya Passornsiri 103**

Early childhood education and preschool intervention: experiences in the world and in Turkey  
**Cigdem Kagitcibasi 108**

Sociocultural correlations involved in the cognitive and physical development of children from urban Guatemala  
**Yetilú de Baessa 117**

**Summary and Conclusions 123**

**Part II: Some Considerations on the Preschool and Primary Problem**

**Introduction 126**

Early childhood programs in Latin America **Robert G. Myers 127**

Conceptual issues in preschool and early primary education **Kenneth King 136**

From child to pupil: winning the game but losing the match? **Norberto Bottani 141**

Compensatory measures in poor areas: some possibilities for preschool education **Carmen Luz Latorre 153**

Summary of some years of preschool research **Hernando Gómez Duque 163**

**Summary and Conclusions 170**

**Part III: Discussion and General Recommendations**

**Program Objectives, Research Prospects, and Policy Formulation 172**

# From Child to Pupil: Winning the Game But Losing the Match ?

Norberto Bottani<sup>1</sup>

"Perhaps the pre-school experience thus helped students acquire more quickly and successfully the role of pupil. If so, it supports the belief in the efficacy of motivational and social behaviour in school performance" (Hess 1977).

"Yet intervention must be cautious because behaviour and attitudes adapted for and essential to survival in the immediate environment should not be abruptly interrupted" (Halpern 1980).

## Introduction: The Reverse Side of the World

By a strange coincidence, just as I was beginning to think about the paper I had to write for this seminar, I was sent the last issue for 1980 of the Harvard Educational Review containing an article on early childhood educational programs in Latin America (Halpern 1980). Reading it convinced me that I had to specify my frame of reference to avoid being misinterpreted but particularly to acquire a better understanding of what I am going to hear and above all see. Before mentioning the things I know best, meaning the state of preschool education in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries and particularly in Europe, and explaining how I interpret developments in the relations between preschool and primary education, I should like to tell you how I see the position and problems of preschool education in Latin America, which I hope will help you to appreciate my own attitude and understand the approach I have adopted in this paper.

<sup>1</sup>Principal Administrator, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2, Rue André Pascal, Paris 75775, France. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not commit either the Organization or the national authorities concerned. I am indebted to my colleagues George Papadopoulos and Pierre Laderrière for their comments on the first version of this paper.

When I compare the data available about childhood conditions in Latin America and in Europe, I have the impression that I am faced with two diametrically different realities, as though there were two worlds, one of which is the reverse of the other. This impression is confirmed from the analysis of three categories of indicators: demographic data, health and sanitary conditions, and employment.

The demographic situation in Latin America is that young people are in the majority in every population. The birth rate is very high and so is the fertility rate. A quarter of the population (nearly 80 million children) is under 6 years of age. The opposite is the case in the OECD countries where the population is markedly aging and the number of young people diminishing.

In Europe, the number of couples with no children or only one child is rising; the intervals between successive births are lengthening, age at marriage is high and the frequency of marriage is diminishing. The predominating type of Latin American family, on the contrary, is large, with pregnancies following close on one another, early marriage, and a high marriage rate.

As regards health and sanitary conditions, a study of the trend of infant mortality, which is a good indicator of progress in sanitary conditions and medical care, will suffice to show that Latin America has an average rate of 84%, whereas it is about 18% in the OECD countries. Mortality might also be considered during the first 4 years of life, which is largely due to malnutrition, poor sanitary conditions, infectious diseases and accidents, and lack of medical care. In this case too, the contrast is tragic: in the advanced industrialized countries, this mortality rate is 0.8%, whereas in Latin America it is 6.9%. On the one side, parents are in very little danger of losing a child, on the other, the risk is high. On the one side, very few children now know what it is to see a brother or sister die during their first few years of life, on the other, it is still a common experience. On the

one side, the composition of families is very homogeneous, the majority consisting of the parents with one or two children relatively close to each other in age, on the other, heterogeneity is the rule and large families with a very wide age differential (because deaths break the even rhythm of steady family growth) live side by side with families in which only one or two children have survived.

In the case of employment, the structural change in the OECD countries that has most affected the functioning and daily lives of households and families, and especially parents with children, has been the spectacular increase in the number of women in paid employment. At the present time, the average participation rate of women in these countries amounts to almost 50% of the female population from 15 to 64 years old (so that one woman out of every two goes out to work), whereas the corresponding rate for men is 85%. This indicator is significant of the change now taking place in living conditions and the rearing of children in the industrialized countries. Thus, if both parents in an increasing number of households work in the productive sector, some solution must be found for minding, tending, and rearing children up to the age of 6 years old who are not yet enrolled in the compulsory educational system. Incidentally, one of the main causes of the growth of preschool education in the industrialized countries was the mass entry into the labour market of young mothers with babies.

In Latin America, the situation in this respect is much more complex. The number of women in regular paid employment is not at the same level, but the number of working women in the productive sector, especially in rural areas, where women have always had jobs in production, or in the clandestine labour market, is fully as large. However, tradition assigns women responsibility for domestic work and confines them exclusively to the role of housewives confirmed in this by the low educational level of the majority of the female population and by the burden of successive pregnancies owing to the absence of family planning.

Admittedly, the contrasts are not as sharply defined as may be assumed from the figures. There is light and shade in all areas but this is masked by the use of averages. Striking inequalities persist in all OECD countries, where certain social classes and regions are less privileged than others. It is known, for example, that infant mortality rates are still high in the lower social categories. Infectious diseases, epidemics, and malnutrition are still prevalent in the Mediterranean

countries, and in a city such as Naples, for example, they are very common. Nor are housing conditions salubrious for everyone as is obvious from a visit to the eight shantytowns of Marseilles or those of Lisbon. Welfare states and consumer societies have their own underprivileged citizens who have so far reaped only a minimum benefit from the constant rise in living standards and purchasing power. Destitution and poverty persist in a "Fourth World" that is ignored, marginalized, and discriminated against (*"Livre Blanc des Enfants du Quart-Monde 1979"* — White Paper on Children of the Fourth World 1979). But it must be admitted that there is no common measure with the social situation in Latin America. Although it is estimated here that between 50 and 65 million children under the age of 6 years old (i.e., about 6.75% of the children in this age group) live in an environment where health and sanitary conditions are inadequate and housing unsuitable (Halpern 1980), it is not even known exactly how many children grow up in similar conditions in the OECD countries. It has been calculated that 5% of the population of the European Community live in very low-income households, but it is not known how many children are included in this group. In the United States 17% of all children under 18 years of age in 1975 belonged to families living below the official poverty line. The international ATD Fourth World movement estimates that "Fourth World" children account for at least 5% of all children in the industrialized countries and that they number 5 million in Europe alone. No indication is given as to age, but it is probable that this estimate concerns all children up to the age of 16 or 18 years old. The number of needy children under 6 years old is, therefore, probably about 1.5 million.

On one side, 1.5 million, on the other 50 to 65 million. Two different magnitudes which cannot be compared; two opposite worlds: in one, social outcasts and extreme poverty are the exception, in the other they are the rule; what is common on one side is uncommon on the other. This background must be borne in mind if what I intend to say about preschool education is not to be misinterpreted.

## Preschool Education

Before I go into greater detail about European trends and experience, it may be useful just once again to compare the general situation. On this point too, the contrast is sharply defined. One need merely consider three aspects of preschool



education: nursery schools (i.e. preschool education facilities for children between three and six years old), day nurseries (institutions for children up to the age of 3 years old) and the ideological implications of preschool education. In Latin America, on the threshold of the 1980s, fewer than 10% of all children take part in early childhood education programs (Halpern 1980); care and educational institutions for children up to the age of 3 are almost nonexistent (Pollitt et al. 1978); not only is the number of children in a preschool educational institution small, but such children also mostly belong to the privileged social classes. The preschool institution is a class institution. I conclude from this that it must be regarded as a luxury and not as a real necessity. It is not surprising in this context that the sociophilanthropic movement is still a central philosophical and institutional base for early intervention and child care programs (Halpern 1980).

In the West European countries, it may be estimated that more than half the children between the ages of 3 and 6 (50–60% of all children) have had some form of preschool education before going to primary school. The network of current preschool facilities is almost as wide as the whole network of primary schools and preschool education is constantly being extended to younger age groups. In France, for example, 40% of the 2-year-olds are already in educational institutions (nursery schools or day nurseries). In many countries, the system of care (various types of day nurseries, nurses, and family fostering arrangements) for babies and children under 3 is a growing sector and an estimated 15% of the children in this age group are regularly looked after for more or less long periods by care services. The increasingly widespread use of preschool services and the extension of the network of nursery schools are accomplished by a change in the social composition of the users, which has become very mixed, and in the function of preschool institutions. Children from all social backgrounds now attend nursery schools that used to be almost exclusively attended by working-class children. Middle-class families are no longer willing to pay for a separate private care and educational service and claim their right to use the public services that they help to finance anyway through taxes. With the arrival in the nursery schools of a large infant population belonging to the wealthier classes of society, the social and welfare function of preschool education has lost ground and its educational function is expanding. The same process is taking place in the day nurseries that were primarily auxiliary health and welfare institutions reserved for chil-

dren of unsettled families or special welfare cases.

The middle classes are taking more and more interest in day nurseries and this attitude has been responsible for the growing number of services and for changes in the practices and operating methods of all the infant care and welfare services, which have taken on an increasing educational role.

In short, preschool services in these countries are neither regarded as a "makeshift" solution by workers who are unable to mind and bring up their own children, nor as a luxury by the middle classes, who wish to provide their children with the best conditions for their development likely to enhance their advantages and social status. Childhood facilities are regarded as a public service available to all families and as an educational service that has become indispensable. However, the increasing interest shown in these services by the richest socioeconomic groups is in the process of changing this situation and is accompanied by repercussions on the functioning and actual conception of preschool education that may well marginalize working-class children in the nursery schools and deprive them of a service that was originally created for them. Developments in the relations between preschool and primary education must be viewed in the light of these changes. European experience is very revealing in this respect as the following considerations show.

## **Place of the Nursery School in the Orbit of the Educational System**

### **Developments in Preschool Education**

Before interpreting the development of preschool education in Europe, a few further figures are needed to show the differences between one country and another. At the start of the 1980s, the following general situations prevailed: countries where preschool education for children between the ages 3 and 5 is almost universal — Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands; countries with a moderate rate of preschool education — around 60–70% in Germany and Italy, about 30–40% in Austria, Ireland, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland; the Nordic countries — Norway, Sweden, and Finland, where the rates of preschool enrollment are relatively low (about 20%), but that have adopted advanced policies concerning facilities and apply very high standards of quality unequalled by other countries; and countries, mostly Mediterranean, where there is little preschool education — (Portugal, Greece, Turkey, and Yugoslavia).

This grouping calls for one or two comments. First, there is an evident disparity between countries. Side by side with those that have nursery schools everywhere, there are others that have almost none. In the former, preschool education is so common as to be almost compulsory. As a result of widespread nursery school attendance, it has become a necessity and a moral "obligation" for parents to send their children to these institutions instead of keeping them at home, to ensure that they will not have any difficulties when they start their basic schooling. In countries with few nursery schools, there is a very great demand for facilities and the authorities are subjected to much pressure from the population to provide them.

Second, these findings are only relatively interesting and even rather commonplace in themselves. On the contrary, what is much more significant is the trend that has led up to this situation and can be followed through the fluctuations in the rates of preschool enrollment. Two facts deserve recording in this connection: first, progress has been made everywhere, both in countries that are in the forefront of preschool education and in those that have fallen behind; second, progress has been very rapid in certain countries such as Germany, Denmark, and Austria (+30% between 1970 and 1980), Sweden (+20%), Norway (+15%) and Italy (+10%). It has been still more spectacular if considered over the longer term: in Austria, for example, the number of children attending nursery schools was 28 168 in 1923/24; it was 162 502 in 1979/80, although the population had not increased and there were even fewer children. In France, in 1925, only 14% of the school population had attended a nursery school (Prost 1968), but by 1980 this rate had risen to 95%.

Third, in the United Kingdom, where there are not so many preschool institutions, the same trend has developed with the phenomenal expansion of the part-time playgroups started unofficially by parents to give 2-4-year-old children somewhere to play together under supervision. They began in the early 1960s and by 1979 they were estimated to be taking more than 400 000 children. These figures entitle us to speak of a real European passion for preschool education, which has made giant strides in the last 20 years.

Fourth, apart from the differences noted in these statistics, there are others, especially of an organizational nature, that are just as great. But the common denominator among all these countries is, nonetheless, the general tendency for preschool services to expand. The figures given here on rates of preschool enrollment are underesti-

mated. In actual fact, the number of children receiving some form of preschool education outside their own families is greater than indicated by the statistics, which concern enrollments in state or semistate institutions (a case in point is the United Kingdom, where it is estimated that 70% of children take part in educational activities before starting school at 5 years of age, but only 30% are enrolled in state nursery schools or classes). All of these observations prove that preschool education is in the process of spreading throughout Europe, that this process is very far advanced, and that this widespread enrollment of young children is on the same scale as the incorporation of older children in the school system 100 years ago when compulsory basic education was introduced.

### **Consequences of the Popularity of Preschool Education**

Many educational, social, economic, and political factors combine to explain the emergence and acceleration of this process (Ariès 1973; Bernstein 1975; Boltanski 1969; Chamboredon and Prévot 1973; Donzelot 1977; Meyer 1977; OECD/CERI 1977; Shorter 1975; Tizard et al. 1976). It is certainly too soon to assess the implications, especially as the growth of preschooling has by no means ended. However, in view of our interest in the educational aspects, we must consider its repercussions on the organization of the educational system at large, as well as its methods of operation and particularly its special pedagogical practices.

From this standpoint, the main consequence of the success of preschool education is that it is now no longer marginal to the educational system and has been integrated as a subsystem into the school structure. Before it took momentum, around 1960, the nursery school was a relatively marginal institution within the educational system. Because of this, it was not subject to the administrative and pedagogical constraints that have been imposed by state intervention in the educational sector and were considered necessary to forge a state and national system of education. When it was on the periphery of the educational system and concerned a small number of children and families, the preschool system enjoyed a high degree of autonomy for several years and this helped to produce an original form of teaching on which most preschool curricula are still based today (Platone 1979).

The corollary of this situation was an almost general lack of interest in the preschool world. No consistent interest was shown in its problems

by the government, the political parties, the trade unions, or researchers. The nursery school was a world apart that benefited and at the same time suffered from this state of isolation.

With the increase in enrollments, classes, and staff and the growth of running costs, this isolation had become meaningless. It was no longer possible to ignore the increasing flow of children entering these schools, nor the pressure of demand from every social class. This marked the end of independence. Many eyes are now turning to the nursery school, which has become an area of conflicting interests (OECD/CERI 1981) as well as the object of a momentous political gamble (the history of the Head Start project in the United States is very significant in this connection). The abrupt growth of the preschool sector has been like a gigantic wave breaking all of a sudden on a calm tidy beach; it has created a crisis for the structures, aims, and methods of the old style of preschool education (Bottani 1981). In becoming popular, the preschool sector has lost its autonomy and fallen within the sphere of influence of the educational system. This development is not owing primarily to any administrative reform, but rather to the formidable social upheaval caused by the mass entry into the kindergartens of age groups of children belonging to socioeconomic sectors that play a culturally predominant role in society. The growing interest in preschool education among the middle classes, which have a well-nigh exclusive monopoly of the production of academic culture (the one recognized by the educational system), is shifting the balance between the functions of preschool education, the way its activities are designed, and its status within the educational system. The educational function is beginning to predominate with the main consequence that the nursery schools are no longer places where children are minded and looked after but have become branches of the educational system and institutions that prepare children for school education, with the consequent risk of becoming places where the latter are preselected in accordance with their social and cultural background (Burguière 1978; Platone 1979). It is in this context that the problems of the profitability of preschool education and its relations with the primary sector, and more broadly with the continuity of education, stand out as central themes in the pedagogical debate and in research and development programs.

One of the solutions considered in response to the identity crisis in preschool education is to attach it to primary education. The other is to improve the coordination of the administrative organization of childhood services.

The two solutions are not similar but have a common identical aim, which is to create a broad coherent field of education in which teachers can perform their function with the minimum of opposition and the maximum chance of success.

I shall consider the educational solution alone because we are mainly interested here in educational problems and because, in doing so, we may identify some of the trends that will affect the future development of the educational system.

## **The Plea for Continuity**

For various reasons that it would be interesting to examine in detail but that cannot be considered here, the idea of a more organic link between preschool and primary education is the one with which specialists of preschool education have been most concerned recently. During the past decade, the Council of Europe has held three symposia on this subject: Venice 1971; Versailles 1975, and Bournemouth 1977 (Council of Europe 1979). In general, it is agreed that there are considerable differences between the pedagogical philosophy of preschool education and primary education; these two types of education are apparently guided by different doctrines that prevent pedagogical continuity being established between them, with regrettable consequences for children as regards the education provided (Woodhead 1979). In other words, preschool education is resisting the pressures put on it to reconsider its own vocation and comply with the demands of primary education. This resistance takes three forms:

(a) Teachers: In most countries, preschool personnel have a lower status than primary teachers and this legal situation is a great obstacle to cooperation between the two categories of staff and to any chance of mobility between the two types of teaching (Corbett 1981; Woodhead 1979). Except for a few countries, such as France, the recruitment requirements are not the same; basic preschool staff training is shorter than for primary teachers and opportunities for in-service continuing training are fewer; the range of career prospects is narrower in the case of preschool staff and pay is lower; working conditions in preschool education are harder because teachers have to reckon with longer working hours and shorter holidays. Finally, with very few exceptions (France), the union and professional organization of the two teaching bodies is not the same and this definitely handicaps preschool staff who are less numerous than their primary school colleagues, have, therefore, less bargaining power

and are weaker when they have to defend or voice their own interests.

This state of affairs is apparently not beyond remedy: it could be ended simply by giving preschool staff the same status. This is the case in France, for example, where nursery school teachers have the same status as primary teachers: they belong to the same corps of civil servants, are paid the same salaries, have the same working hours, and undergo the same occupational training. If judged by some of the results, these tactics have been quite successful and have definitely facilitated a certain alignment between preschool and primary education, as is shown by research on the risks of surreptitious educational preselection in nursery schools (CRESAS 1974).

Although there is official resistance to any strictly educational activity in nursery schools and the specific nature of preschool education is still proclaimed, there is in practice an increasing trend toward osmosis between the two levels (statement by the Minister of Education, R. Haby, at the Council of Europe Symposium on Pre-School Education held in Versailles in 1975), which is not always to the children's advantage (CRESAS 1978).

However, this result was also possible because of the influence of other factors that are peculiar to the French situation but too numerous to enumerate here. It cannot, therefore, be stated with complete certainty that granting the same staff status and the same salaries is sufficient in itself to eliminate the divisions between preschool and primary education.

(b) School curricula: There is considerable antagonism on this point. Preschool teaching is usually liberal and allows educators great freedom with the aim of fostering the harmonious development of children in a warm human climate through a series of loosely structured experiences in a highly stimulating environment. Although school teaching has changed a great deal, it has remained more restrictive and nominative, and teachers are less free to follow the children's interests as they are obliged to comply with timetables, attain certain targets, operate within a set structure, and grade the children (Bernstein 1975). There is only one way of establishing continuity, i.e., by devising a single curriculum that is common both to preschool and to primary education. These tactics are employed in several recent curriculum reforms and in several preschool education experiments. On the one side, the invisible preschool pedagogy is tending to spill over into the primary school, as may be perceived from the changes made in the methods

of teaching reading and writing, whereas, on the other side, the rigid school curricula, observation grids, and sophisticated grading methods of the contemporary psychopedagogical arsenal are making ever deeper inroads into the nursery schools, as may be seen in many experiments of compensatory education that are based on structured programs of cognitive stimulation or early learning and in the development of preschool curricula based on or reflective of Piaget's theory, but in a very ambiguous way (Kamii and Devries n.d.).

Two opposing movements, therefore, exist side by side, both designed to establish continuity between school and preschool education either by using formal teaching methods to give specific shape to the empirical assumptions underlying a great deal of preschool pedagogy or by applying the spontaneous and nondirective principles of preschool education to school teaching. This transmission of the practices and methods of one sector to the other has not so far been applied on any large scale and very little is known about its effects either on children or on the different variables in the school and preschool environment. A third possible alternative in which a special preschool curriculum is based on real-life situations (Zimmer 1973) seems much more interesting. This course has been taken in particular in Germany, where new preschool methods have been devised to dislodge learning and experience from the school or semischool "ghettos" in which they are isolated (Zimmer 1975), while avoiding the vagueness of the naive *in situ* experiments characteristic of spontaneous or nondirective approaches. However, there is nothing to prove that this method can offer any better way of linking the preschool and primary sectors of the educational system.

(b) Administrative structures: In practically no country is the preschool sector organized in the same way as the primary sector, and this is a source of many difficulties whenever adjustments are being considered with a view to bringing the two sectors closer together.

Primary education, even in countries with a federal tradition such as Switzerland and Germany, is a homogeneous service governed by a single body of legislation that lays down its methods of operation, curricula, and objectives. Compulsory schooling is one of the pillars of the state educational system and the state as teacher wields its authority through it. State supervision of the educational world is constant and exercised through the system of continuous supervision that is an integral part of any educational system. Preschool education, which is not

monopolized by the state, is much more heterogeneous and much less rigid than primary education. Local authorities have more control over the development and management of facilities and are often not even obliged to provide child-care and educational institutions for young children. This state of affairs has two consequences: the first is a great variety of facilities and the second is the importance which private initiative still retains in the preschool sector.

Different types of preschool institutions may exist side by side in the same country and depend on different authorities, but compulsory schooling is a standard system and subject everywhere to the same authority.

In Italy, there are three types of nursery school, run, respectively, by the state, the local authorities, and the private sector. In 1976, only 19.7% of all children between the ages of 3 and 5 went to state nursery schools, whereas 46.5% went to private schools. In the United Kingdom, the wide range of preschool institutions is even more astonishing: in the state sector, there are nursery schools under the local education authorities (LEAs), LEA nursery classes attached to primary schools and day nurseries; in the private sector, there are playgroups, which are by far the facilities most utilized, day nurseries, and nursery schools. An equally wide variety of alternatives exists in other countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and Denmark. The variety of structures combined with the distribution of administrative responsibility between authorities situated at different levels makes it a very complicated matter to change the organization of the preschool sector and obtain greater equality of service by linking it more organically to the educational system.

Combining administrative responsibility under a single Ministry in no way changes the problem. In any case, in most European countries, it is the ministries of education (at both central and regional levels) that supervise preschool education (Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Switzerland), but their tutelage covers parallel institutions controlled by different administrative departments that are often jealous of their powers and still more of their educational theories, and there has not been any unifying effect worth speaking of. In the Nordic countries, supervision of preschool education is a monopoly of the ministries of social affairs (Finland, Norway, and Sweden) and one can well imagine the frictions that must occur when a child moves up from preschool to primary education, where the institutions are under ministry of education control. A few coun-

tries have mixed solutions, with competing ministries (usually the ministries of social affairs, health, labour, and education) supervising parallel preschool services for children of the same age group (Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom). In these cases, the difficulties of coordination are almost insurmountable.

In the absence of agreement on any preschool staff training and qualifications, and because there are not only no teaching methods suited to the new social and cultural situation and based on specific common objectives and no administrative reform likely to unify the preschool structures, there is little hope of ever completely linking preschool to primary education. Accordingly, there are only two possible solutions: either the promotion of educational continuity is dropped altogether as impracticable and utopian, or radical action is taken. Certain countries have decided on this second course by creating a new type of school for children aged 4-8 that merges the nursery school with the first few years of primary school and bridges the gap between the two.

### **The Geneva "Fluidity" Experiment**

To understand this experiment, it must be remembered that Geneva is at the very antipodes of most of the geopolitical situations in Latin America. It is a very wealthy city, a tiny republic of 500 000 people that can be crossed in half an hour and has almost luxurious educational facilities, highly qualified and also very well paid teachers (probably among the highest paid in Europe), a remarkable pedagogical tradition (Claparède, Bovet, Ferrière, Dottrens), and the Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Piaget. It is thanks to all of these factors combined that this experiment could be devised and launched as the prelude to the creation of a new school structure called the elementary division and intended for all children between the ages of 4 and 8.

The authorities' decision to alter procedure at the start of the basic compulsory schooling stage by making changes in school structures, work organization, curricula, equipment, teacher training, and pupil-teacher ratios was owing to the very poor performance achieved by children particularly in learning to read and from a desire to take further advantage of preschool education to facilitate the adjustment of the children to the school environment.

In Geneva, the number of repeaters in the first 2 years of basic schooling is about 6% and it has been observed that at least 25% of children in

their first year have socioemotive difficulties in settling into classroom life in spite of the fact that most of them have already been to nursery school for 1 or 2 years.

On examining this situation, the educational authorities concluded that pupils' learning difficulties were owing to the absence of fluidity in their schooling (i.e., the absence of pedagogical continuity). They, therefore, decided to finance research on improving the links between nursery and primary school as part of their campaign to remedy inequality in the children's chances of educational success. The experiment was confined to 30 classes (about 700 pupils) and began with the school year 1974/75, terminating in June 1977. It was considered sufficiently positive (the results will be seen later) for the authorities to decide to begin progressively extending the "fluidity" approach in autumn 1978 (Feyler 1978). The characteristics of this experiment were as follows (Hutin 1979).

Teachers were asked to observe each child systematically to detect his or her learning difficulties. The underlying theory of the "fluidity" experiment is to differentiate teaching in accordance with each child's individual needs. Its aim is to determine the optimum conditions under which each individual child will derive the maximum benefit from the first few years at school. It does not try to organize remedial action, but advocates the utmost differentiation in teaching methods. A knowledge of each child is, therefore, the essential prerequisite of this approach as opposed to the prevailing practice of traditional teaching, based on a profile of the average pupil who is supposed to be representative of the whole class.

The work done and the ensuing discussions revealed the difficulties experienced by teachers in observing children and discovering each child's abilities and capacity. A method was devised for systematically observing pupils to obtain a more thorough knowledge of each individual. It was designed for use by teachers themselves, giving them information that they could put into direct practical application. The main characteristic of this method of observation is that it is not a fine analytical grid of the type used by psychologists. It has to be used flexibly in the classroom during the daily work routine and should draw the attention of teachers to a number of points that reveal the differences between children.

Teaching is differentiated when a child transfers to the first primary year. A support arrangement has been introduced whereby nursery school teachers work half-time with primary teachers. One support teacher is availa-

ble for every six classes.

The support teacher works 5 half-days per week. Four mornings are spent on support proper and half a day each week is set aside for examining the problems of support strategies, discussing individual cases, working out appropriate teaching methods, and preparing suitable equipment in association with researchers and the school authorities.

Support teachers have their own room where groups of two to four pupils are received for a period of 20 to 45 minutes. Much importance is attached to close liaison between the class teacher and the support teacher. At certain times, the latter even works in the classroom.

The researchers have been cautious in their assessment of the results obtained. The experiment enabled the number of repeaters to be reduced by more than half and to be replaced by support teaching, and this was considered satisfactory. But the number of repeaters did not fall because of improved educational performance but as a result of an administrative decision that made it automatic for all pupils to pass up from the first to the second year and abolished the reading test at the end of the first year that had formerly been the main means of selection.

As regards educational performance itself, however, the check group was always above the "fluidity" group in all the tests, and the pupils had similar gradings in both groups whatever the tests. In short, the "fluidity" approach has so far been mainly effective in improving the adjustment of the pupils to the school environment, in partly reducing their learning difficulties, and in inducing teachers to overhaul their teaching methods completely.

### **The Netherlands and Belgian Experiment**

It is interesting first to note that the radical solution of merging nursery and primary school either by creating a new institution or by absorbing the preschool sector's share of primary education is also being tried out in two countries (the Netherlands and Belgium) where conditions are very similar to those in Geneva: they are small countries with no geographical barriers, very easy communications, economies that were still flourishing until recently, and almost complete preschool enrollment of all 4-6-year-olds. This situation explains why all three countries have a common interest in wanting to secure better results from the early school years by reducing repeat rates.

The Netherlands (Cebeon 1979) has been experimenting since school year 1974/75 with a

new type of primary school for 4–12-year-old children that eliminates the present gap between the nursery school for children aged 4–6 and the primary school for those between 6 and 12 years of age (Ministry of Education 1975). About 150 schools have so far taken part in the experiment, which has given rise to unusual cooperation and participation by all concerned and an impressive range of methodological experiments, educational schemes, research activities, and assessment practices. As was the case in Geneva, it is difficult for the moment to judge the results obtained and whether or not the new school meets the hope that the formal institutional process of educating children will finally be significantly modified. According to an evaluation report (Cebeon 1979), only 35% of the schools considered that they now paid more attention to individual differences between children; 41% said that their attitude had not changed in this respect. Nevertheless, the Netherlands has decided to move toward complete integration of preschool with primary education in 1983 and has launched an immense reform process affecting 8300 primary classes and 6800 nursery schools, 2 million children and 70 000 teachers that should completely change the structure of basic education within about 10 years.

In Belgium, a similar merging of the nursery school with the initial years of primary education into a new 4–8-year-old cycle is under way with the aim of harmonizing the transition from nursery to primary school and appreciably reducing repeats and poor school performance. The main feature of the experiment is the organization of new school units of at least 50 children between 5 and 8 years of age supervised by a teaching team necessarily comprising for each group of 30 children a nursery school teacher, a primary school teacher (man or woman), and an extra teacher for each additional group of pupils above 30.

The experiment took place between September 1976 and June 1979 and included 39 schools. In the Belgian authorities' view, this experiment is only one aspect of a more ambitious educational reform that plans to renew the entire educational process by creating a basic school to provide a continuing education divided into three cycles: a first cycle from the age of 2½ to 5 years, a second cycle from 5 to 8, and a third cycle from 8 to 12 (OECD 1978).

The first evaluation report comes to the same conclusions as those on the Genevan and Dutch experiments: teachers and researchers showed great drive and enthusiasm, pupils' difficulties were determined more effectively, and greater

attention was paid to their differences, with the subsequent adoption of personalized teaching methods. However, nearly a quarter of these institutions consider that the reforms have not sufficiently reduced the obstacles between preschool and primary education because the action taken was largely administrative and did not really settle the underlying problem.

Considerable misgivings were expressed by preschool educators who feared that the new schools would finally adopt the stereotyped pattern of existing primary schools and that the reform would merely turn into a process for the early enrollment of young children. Primary education, reinforced by the experiment would be the gainer and the nursery school the loser. Its individual style and type of teaching would disappear and there would be no other chance of influencing or changing educational habits and practices.

## Conclusions

There are many historical examples of attempts to amalgamate countries, but few have succeeded. In most cases the union has been short-lived, and the upsurge of brotherly feeling between the peoples concerned has often ended rapidly in disappointment. Indeed, it is easy to remove frontiers by decree; it is a much more complicated matter to create unity, remove prejudices, overcome mistrust, and achieve sincere cooperation between groups with different interests. With all due reservations, the relations between preschool and primary education are open to the same analysis as those between two neighbouring countries with common interests. They are obliged as a matter of course to negotiate lines of communication that will largely depend on the balance of power between them.

At the present point in the development of the educational system, a renegotiation of the relations between the preschool and primary sectors is of immediate importance because the balance between the two "powers" has changed or is in the process of changing as a result of the disruption caused by expansion or by operational difficulties in both types of school.

Preschool education is undergoing a crisis because it is in full process of growth, and this has disrupted some or all of its functions. Its practices, teaching methods, and organization no longer meet the needs of its users and do not respond to the social and educational pressures it is subjected to, so that questions are constantly

being asked about its utility, efficiency, and necessity. It is in fact urgent to redesign the preschool institution, both in countries where it is now highly developed and in those where it is still in an embryonic stage, for neither the old philanthropic welfare model nor the educational model applied in some sections of contemporary preschool education is in a position to offer solutions to these difficulties.

Primary education is also in a crisis because it is not clear about its own objectives and methods. In the controversy over poor school performance, the primary school is censured for its inability to cope with the wide variety of its pupils and criticism focuses on the limitations of teaching methods based on compulsory uniform curricula. Criticism concerning standards of performance has not only revealed the ambiguity of educational objectives as at present defined but also pointed out the weakness of the teaching methods available to tackle the problem of giving children the basic skills for acquiring knowledge. The primary school model, geared to cognitive development, is disputed because it is reductive and unfair, grading pupils who are not on an equal footing, whereas the primary school model, geared to personality development, is criticized for its poor performance in teaching the basic skills.

So long as preschool and primary education are in difficulties they cannot develop and face the challenge of a constantly changing social and economic environment. They must overcome their crisis as rapidly as possible. The action taken to influence the relations between preschool and primary education may be interpreted as signs of this emergency. Both in politics and in married life, there are several possible strategies for overcoming a crisis. The same applies to education. In the light of the preceding comments on the relations between preschool and primary education, I feel that the following issues are the most conceivable:

(a) The most popular way of solving difficulties is to spread and extend the conflict and seek a scapegoat. This is a negative solution; it ignores the internal causes of problems and difficulties and tries to project a responsibility on an outside source. The sector with the strongest structure and the greatest influence ends up by winning and consolidates its internal order and equilibrium at the expense of the weaker sectors. This procedure may be readily observed in the way basic education has developed. The parents and the nursery school are accused, each in their turn, by the primary school of being uncooperative and inadequate educators and are criticized because

they do not play the intermediate role that might be expected of them and, thereby, facilitate the tasks of the primary school. Therefore, the parents' education and subsequently the introduction of structured cognitive curricula within the preschool education are considered as the core of the reform programs.

(b) The attitude of primary education in its relations with preschool education is neither one of hostility nor cooperation, but one of continuity and is designed to integrate the preschool phase into the formal educational system. Pursuing the political metaphor, it might be said that primary education tries to settle its problems by colonizing preschool education, forcing it to adopt its own objectives, methods of work, organizational pattern, and staff through sweeping administrative and bureaucratic reforms. The mechanisms and structures of the school are changed, but not the substance, i.e., educational practices and traditions. This solution has gained favour because it seems to be the most innovative, the simplest, and the most profitable for the different groups concerned. It is, therefore, supported by a very mixed coalition of different pressure groups all directly interested in its success: preschool teachers anxious to improve their pay and career prospects; primary teachers who hope their teaching difficulties will be solved if they receive pupils with a better preparation; research workers who feel that it provides them with vast areas of research that have become necessary to evaluate experience, establish curricula, and find out more about formal learning processes; middle-class parents who are ready to make any sacrifice on behalf of their children's education; and the administrators of primary education who are normally in favour of any coordination-oriented reform because they hope in this way to extend their authority or sphere of influence.

(c) The chances of success of this type of reform cannot be taken for granted, as is demonstrated by the difficulties encountered in reviewing the status of preschool teachers, curricula, or structures and in carrying out the more innovative experiments. Paradoxically enough, the children themselves are the main cause of these difficulties. They play the classical role here of the grain of sand that prevents the machine from working properly.

The children's resistance to reform is of course passive and almost subconscious, but it can also be violent as in the acts of vandalism in school buildings committed by very young pupils. This resistance has two origins: (a) it stems from their refusal to go through the process calculated to



change the child into a pupil and (b) it sabotages the professionalization of childhood (Chamboredon and Prévot 1975), the attempt to isolate the children in a protected and closed space. In this perspective we have to take in account more seriously the difficulties of childrens' education avoiding considering these difficulties only individually as handicaps that can be corrected or compensated.

Taking the opposite view, we may say that the continuity solution is questionable if it involves: (a) the subordination of childrens' interests to those of the institution and (b) a theory and definition of childhood that repudiate spontaneity and imagination, rationalize all the learning processes, codify the stages and rhythms of growth, and merge play with work.

The popularity of the theme of continuity is based on an illusion of pedagogical omnipotence and a theory of childhood that purports to offer instruments for methodical and apparently effective observation and action in the child's world. Its success stems from the belief that it is possible to change children (children change naturally in any case in the course of their development), that their growth can be channelled and stimulated and even accelerated and that action must be taken as early as possible in the interests of education.

No substantial progress of any kind in the field of early childhood education will be made if instead of beginning to change the school we persist in trying to change children.

It cannot be ruled out that the professionals of human services armed with a panoply of instruments and plans for early intervention will finally triumph over the children and produce well-behaved, disciplined pupils. Specialists of all kinds may win the game. But winning the match, i.e., making every child into a responsible and independent citizen, respected, vigilant, and conscious of his or her rights, is quite another story. You may win one game or two games but lose the match if you persist in trying to change children without at the same time changing the school. I do not believe that that should be our aim.

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