School readiness: a conceptual framework [1]

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Introduction

Through a combination of national social policies and international articulations including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Education for All (EFA) goals and the World Fit for Children (WFFC) targets, countries are working to ensure universal access to quality basic education. However, worldwide evidence highlights the persistence of inequity in enrolment, attendance, learning outcomes and achievement based on gender, poverty, geographical location, ethnicity, health status, conflict and natural disasters which all play a role in defining which children attend what kind of school and for how long. Most early dropouts and repeaters at school are disadvantaged students. In addition, the intersection of poverty, location, disability, the lack of a formal identity and HIV/AIDS have created multiple and complex barriers to school entry and learning. Growing concerns at the crux of these alarming issues centre around three fundamental questions: Are all children entering school with the social and cognitive skills and competencies needed to achieve in school? Are schools equipped and ready to provide optimal learning environments for all children? Are families and communities ready to help their children make a smooth transition into school?

Globally, school readiness is gaining currency as a viable strategy to close the learning gap and improve equity in achieving lifelong learning and full developmental potential among young children. It does so by considering all children, especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged, including girls, children with disabilities, ethnic minorities and those living in rural areas. School readiness supports the adoption of policies and standards for early learning, expanding the provision of opportunities beyond formal centre-based services to target those who are excluded. School readiness has been linked with positive social and behavioural competencies in adulthood as well as improved academic outcomes in primary and secondary school, both in terms of equity and performance. In addition, school readiness has been garnering attention as a strategy for economic development. Approaches to economic growth and development consider human capital as a key conduit for sustained and viable development, the inception of which begins in the early years.

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