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Promoting critical knowledge, skills and qualifications for sustainable development in Africa: How to design and implement an effective response by education and training systems

Sub-theme 1
Common core skills for lifelong learning and sustainable development in Africa

SCHOOL READINESS and TRANSITION IN THE GAMBIA

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ABSTRACT

Working Document

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1. ABSTRACT

1.   Children have the right to be safe, cared for, and stimulated at home, in school, and in the community. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that parents are a child's first and best educators and caregivers. The CRC recognises also that a child's capacities evolve rapidly between the ages of 3 and 6 years. During this period, children more fully develop their intellectual and social potential in safe, caring, play-based, and stimulating environments; such environments also help to fulfil their rights to participation and non-discrimination.

2.   Starting primary school is, indeed, a very critical experience for most children and could provoke a shock for many of them if they are not properly prepared (physically, cognitively and socio-emotionally) to cope with this new learning environment. It is commonly acknowledged that there is a direct link between children's early experience, their subsequent learning and their successful evolution not only in the school system but in their global life as well in coherence with the labour market needs. Therefore, the concept of "school readiness" is at the heart of any intervention to promote early childhood development in order to ensure to all children a good start to life[1]. What is overlooked is the fact that investment in Early Childhood Development (ECD) is the critical foundation for children's school readiness and achieving success in school and life.[2]

3.   The concept of "school readiness" implies more than children's early learning and abilities. It refers also to two other factors: school readiness for children and family readiness for school. Those are two conditions to ensure a smooth transition for the 3-6 (preschool) and the 6-8 (first grade of primary school) year old children. ECD programmes and early primary school components should be linked as a whole. Literature on the transition process strongly emphases the point that early childhood programs are more effective if they are part of a broader coherent framework, linking early child development initiatives to children's experience at home with the new reality of primary school and to primary education experiences. It is critical to develop policies so as to build bridges and to narrow the gaps across levels, including staff training, regulations, administrative departments and curricula. Cross-sectoriality should also be secured in order to ensure the holistic development of the young child.

4.   Even though it is internationally acknowledged that the 6-8 year period is part of the early childhood development process and that this is a critical stage for children's successful integration in primary school and for their subsequent learning, this age group is not really taken into consideration by ECD specialists and by policy-makers. Moreover, the inclusion of young children coming from deprived environments with no proper early stimulation are often being neglected in the learning environment that has to cope with large classes and little learning material. What is being done within education systems to offer to the 3-6 and the 6-8 year old children a welcoming environment and developmentally learning opportunities? What is happening in the Africa region where the majority of children start school late and where the large majority has no previous early learning experience? What measures are being taken? **To what extent are schools ready to facilitate young children's integration and performance as well as their holistic development?** To what extent does the pre-primary school and the primary school curriculum pay attention to the integration of vulnerable children who have not had access to ECD programmes? What place is given in primary school programmes to components such as health, nutrition, water and sanitation, and protection of the young child? Are those programmes promoting participation of children as well as of their parents and their community with objectives to build skills and competences for Basic Education?

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[1] Is everybody ready? Readiness, transition and continuity : lessons, reflections and moving forward, Background Paper for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, by Caroline Arnold

[2] Planning Policies for Early Childhood Development: Guidelines for Action, Emily Vargas-Barón, published by UNESCO, 2005 ,