

# Conference on Education for All in Europe and North America

6 to 8 February 2000, Warsaw, Poland



## **Pre-school: the lucky ones and the others...**

Early childhood education varies in many countries from top-quality to poor provision. The best scenario is when its importance for the child's future is reflected in the funding it receives. The worst is when an economic crisis relegates it to the back burner of the education system. Between the two extremes, there are wide variations and great differences in quality, notably between schools in cities and those in rural areas.

The consequences of the economic crisis on early childhood education in Central and Eastern Europe have been particularly severe. Under communism, preschools were generally operated by the factories or businesses where the parents worked, and many of these have disappeared.

In Russia, 27,600 nursery schools closed their doors between 1990 and 1999. In January 1998, only 53.8 per cent of Russian children between the ages of 3 and 5 were enrolled. Whether pre-schools are public (in most cases) or private, access to them today is a real problem. Living standards have declined, but the cost of education has risen. The combination of high prices and mediocre quality mean parents keep their children at home.

In general, early childhood education is progressing. In the United Kingdom, the percentage of 3-year-olds enrolled at pre-school level went from 40 per cent in 1989 to 50 per cent in 1997-98. In Portugal, the rate of pre-school attendance increased more than 14 per cent between 1989-90 and 1996-97. However, one in two young children are still at home. Italy, where 95 per cent of children were in nursery schools in 1998, is aiming at 100 per cent attendance this year, a percentage which the 100-year-old *école maternelle* system in France attained many years ago.

Programmes have been developed to improve quality and facilitate access to early childhood education. In Portugal, a special programme aims at progressively integrating 90 per cent of 5-year-olds, 75 per cent

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of 4-year-olds and 60 per cent of 3-year-olds. In some countries, at least one year of nursery school is required for entry into primary level.

Preschool establishments have more than a child-minding role. Far from being a place for harried parents to 'park' their children, they buzz with the stimulation of educational activities.

Pre-primary education is an essential investment, because of its proven long-term effects on future schooling and its social role in reducing the risks of failure, drop-out and marginalization. After all, a tree grows better when it has good roots.



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