

First School

UNITING THE BEST OF EARLY CHILDHOOD,
ELEMENTARY, AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

Number Six

Issues in PreK–3rd Education



Issues in Education for Children Three to Eight in Six Countries

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Elementary schools in the United States increasingly serve children prior to kindergarten. Just through publicly-funded pre-kindergarten programs, programs for children with special needs, and Head Start programs, many more than a million children are now in public school before kindergarten.^{1,2} The inclusion of younger children in public schools comes at “a time of unprecedented interest in identifying, deepening, and exploiting the connections between early childhood and elementary education.”³ Educators are paying increasing attention to the alignment of educational experiences for children from age three through eight both developmentally and academically.⁴

FirstSchool

FirstSchool is a pre-K–grade 3 initiative led by FPG and the UNC-CH School of Education to promote public school efforts to become more responsive to the needs of an increasingly younger, more diverse population. FirstSchool unites the best of early childhood, elementary, and special education.

www.firstschool.us

FirstSchool is part of a national PreK–3rd movement of schools, districts, educators and universities seeking to improve how children from ages 3 to 8 learn and develop in schools. While these different projects use a variety of names, all are working to connect high-quality PreK programs with high-quality elementary schools. For more resources on this movement, please visit the Foundation for Child Development’s website.

www.fcd-us.org

Who is FPG?

For more than 40 years, FPG Child Development Institute (FPG) research and outreach have shaped how the nation cares for and educates young children. We are one of the nation’s oldest and largest multidisciplinary centers dedicated to the study of children and families.

www.fpg.unc.edu

Who is the UNC-CH SOE?

The School of Education was established at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1885 and is organized under four academic areas: teaching and learning; educational leadership; human development and psychological studies; and culture, curriculum and change.

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The US is not the only country making changes in how it meets the educational needs of young children. There is much to learn from the rest of the world. The countries profiled here—France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and Sweden—are relatively comparable to the United States in terms of economic development, and they have recently examined how they serve children ages three through eight. By studying the experiences of other nations and their approaches to similar issues, we can gain insight into the choices we make about the ways we educate and care for young children.

Alignment and Coordination of Early Education Experiences

In all six of the countries profiled, most children attend government sponsored elementary schools starting at between five and seven years of age, with various arrangements for extended day and extended year care. In New Zealand and the United States, children begin elementary school at age five, but in the United States there are more and more pre-kindergarten classes in elementary schools, for four- and even three-year-olds. In France, Germany, and Japan children begin elementary school at about age six. And in Sweden, elementary school begins officially at age seven, but the “preschool class” for six-year-olds is located within school buildings.

Prior to elementary school, the types of programs available and the way they are governed vary by country. In France, every child at age three (or age two in zones of special priority) can attend the *écoles maternelles*, which are under the auspice of the central government’s Ministry of Education. France’s approach is unique. Historically, the other countries have relied on a mixture of private and public providers and different government agencies to provide and oversee these programs.

However, all are moving in different ways toward greater coordination of early childhood services and a greater role for education agencies in overseeing these services. Whether there should be greater alignment and coordination between early childhood settings and elementary schools, and if so, how best to achieve those goals, is an issue each country has approached differently.

France.⁵ While all schools, including *écoles maternelles*, are governed by the national Ministry of Education, what happens in elementary school is intentionally quite different from what happens in *école maternelle*. Play is important at *écoles maternelles*, and this is reflected in the materials available to children and the arrangement of furnishings. Children also spend time in *école maternelle* in whole group settings, to hear stories or to sing, but elementary school classrooms have rows of desks and, overall, a much more formal educational environment.

France has a systematic method for easing the transition between these settings. The educational trajectory is divided into educational cycles which cross the normal school transitions. Cycles are an organizational structure requiring teachers to work together across grades. US educators sometimes engage in vertical teaming across grades within a school, but Cycle 2 in France creates a bridge between schools by including the last year of *école maternelle* and the first two years of elementary school. Teachers working together within Cycle 2 collaborate on a common project approach and talk about children who have difficulties.

Figure 1.
Multiyear cycles create a bridge for children

Cycle 1: The early learning skills cycle	École maternelle: level 1
	École maternelle: level 2
Cycle 2: The basic learning skills cycle	École maternelle: level 3
	Elementary school: 1st grade
	Elementary school: 2nd grade

Germany.⁶ As in the United States, schools are financed primarily at the state and local levels, which also have a substantial amount of autonomy. Kindergartens have been operated by two major entities: municipal agencies and religiously affiliated programs. Traditionally, there has been a strict separation between Kindergarten* and elementary school, but these worlds are beginning to collide as education agencies seek more control of Kindergarten, traditionally a social welfare program. The KiDZ initiative, which includes both Kindergarten and elementary teachers in the same class, is an effort by education and welfare agencies to collaborate, but different educational requirements for teachers in Kindergartens and in schools make implementation of this model challenging. There is discussion of changing the education of the Kindergarten teachers to better equip them to implement the KiDZ curriculum on their own.

In the 1970s, children attended school entrance classes to ease the transition from the various Kindergarten settings to school. When these classes were discontinued, there was wide agreement that greater interaction was needed between the two settings, such as visiting, exchanging teachers for seminars, and parent meetings. Unfortunately, studies found

that cooperation remained very low. As a result the transition from Kindergarten to elementary school is still problematic (in 2003, 5.6% of all children of the legal school entrance age delayed school start for one year), so new models of the school entry class are being developed.

In Germany, as in the US, there is a growing movement to rethink how young children are educated. One idea being proposed is the *Bildungshaus* (houses of education) for children from age three to ten. These “houses of education” would create closer local cooperation between Kindergarten and elementary school—not only to improve the transition phase but to include all age groups from three to ten years old in a unified program. In 2008, a large model program for developing and evaluating *Bildungshaus* began in the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg.

Japan.⁷ Prior to formal school entry children may attend kindergartens (which are under the authority of the education ministry) or nurseries (which are under the authority of the health, labor and welfare ministry). While kindergartens are considered an education program, they are quite distinct from elementary schools. Seventy-nine percent of kindergartens are private, with an additional 20% provided by municipalities. Nurseries, providing what in the United States would be considered child care, also are prevalent. Privatization of public nursery centers is increasing, and there is a large group of uncertified private nurseries as well. The education and health ministries are seeking to build greater cohesion between the systems.

In Japan the transition to elementary school is known as the “first grade problem.” Children experience a dramatic shift from very child-centered settings where they have a great deal of autonomy to a school setting where cooperation and group identity are highly valued, and there is a strong emphasis on academic performance. Significant numbers of children find this transition difficult. Many parents have

taken matters into their hands by sending their children to “cram” school before they even start elementary school. Here they are drilled in academic subjects and learn to adjust to a stricter school environment.

New Zealand.⁸ New Zealand is implementing a ten-year plan called *Pathways to the Future—2002–2012* to improve the quality of early childhood education services, increase participation in those services, and promote collaborative relationships. According to Michael Gaffney, “One of the aims of the plan is to provide a system that maintains and supports the diverse range of services currently available to parents and families.” These include Education and Care Centres, Home-based Services, Kindergartens, *Kōhanga Reo* (Maori language and customs), License-exempt Playgroups, Parent Support and Development Programmes, Playcentres, and Correspondence School early childhood services. These programs provide options for parents ranging from a few hours per week to full-day care for children from birth to school age (five years old). They may be privately owned, non-profit, community-based services; operated within a parent’s place of employment; home-based caregivers; community-based groups of parents and children; or collectives supervised and managed by parents for children up to the age of five.

The relationship between early childhood settings and elementary schools is the weakest component of the strategic plan. Training is offered for teachers of children birth through eight as a way to bring people from the different sectors together. One issue in the transition to elementary school is whether or not delayed entry is appropriate for some children, and how to make those decisions. Typically-developing children are seldom retained in the early years of elementary school. However, many children who have special needs experience a delayed entry to school, staying in early childhood centers until age six.

Sweden.⁹ Preschool was formerly a part of the social service sector, but is now under the auspice of education and is guided by a national curriculum. Even as preschool was brought under the purview of education, policymakers made a conscious decision to keep preschool in community settings separate from elementary school. Swedish children age six and younger can attend preschool three hours a day and 170 days a year, with a focus on instruction. Children can go to the leisure time center for full time child care outside the home.

Educators are committed to responding to both the demand for making preschool the first part of school and the desire to maintain the emphasis on individual child needs and relationships with families. The National Agency for Education has taken the position that excessive emphasis placed on formal learning at an early stage can have negative consequences. In 1998 the Preschool Class for six-year-olds was established. These classes are in the elementary school and are seen as helping to accomplish the transition from preschool to school. Compared to preschool education for children ages one to five, the Preschool Class for six-year-olds has more instruction, and the teacher is trained at the same level as other elementary school teachers. Teams of teachers with various competencies support the children's transition from preschool to the Preschool Class and into the further grades in elementary school.

United States.^{10,11} The early childhood situation in the United States has been described as “parallel play.” A variety of different providers, both public and private, deliver the services. These providers include:

- State and locally funded pre-kindergarten programs primarily for four-year-old children.
- Head Start agencies embedded in a combination of private non-profit and public agencies, including substantial participation by public schools. Often Head Start

agencies participate in state pre-kindergarten programs.

- Private for-profit and non-profit agencies providing child care services some of which are also tied into state pre-kindergarten programs.
- Private, non-profit and public agencies providing services specifically to young children with special needs.
- Independent preschool and nursery school programs some of which are non-profit and some for profit.

These programs are supervised by a complex set of local, state and federal agencies including both educational and health and human services agencies.

The transition to kindergarten is a major issue in early education in the United States. Most three- and four-year-olds are still served in non-public school settings. Various initiatives exist to forge improved connections between early care and education providers and the public schools their young students will attend. The National Education Goals Panel, a bipartisan body of federal and state officials and national leaders in education, identified strategies to promote continuity for children and families between their early care and education settings and schools, and challenged schools to alter programs and practices that do not benefit children.¹³ At the state level, there is a growing recognition that “school readiness” refers not only to the condition of children when they enter school, but also the capacity of schools to educate all children, whatever each child's condition may be.¹⁴

Confronting the Future

Each of these countries has taken major steps toward providing improved education and child care services to families and children. Each has chosen a path that reflects their current reality and at the same time is based on long traditions in their countries. There is

much we can learn from the ways their systems are evolving.

First, there is agreement across countries in terms of what is important for young children. There is an emphasis on children being humans with the same human rights as adults. In New Zealand, children are seen as having a right to a certain number of hours of education and also a right to a setting of the family's choosing. The rights of Māori and other language-minority children to a culturally and linguistically appropriate environment are strongly defended.

Second, there is some recognition of the need to balance the drive for a strong educational intervention with the need for children to have a good quality of life. The Japanese see this as a lifelong struggle to balance “making life worthwhile” and “making a living.” In New Zealand children don't go to an early childhood program to prepare for school. They go because of needs they have now, to develop their strengths and interests. One expression of these values is seen in the support for programs that preserve a specific cultural heritage.

A third commonality among these countries is recognition that the provision of services has a dual function. The evolving status of early childhood education is recognition of the fact that mothers of young children are an indispensable segment of the paid labor force and that this requires support for services that young families are simply not able to pay for on their own. Concomitantly, there is a vastly expanded view of the learning potential of young children and the impact of early learning on later success in school and life in general. In the United States, there has been financial support for low- and moderate-income families to participate in market-based child care, and a major shift toward involvement of the public schools in providing pre-kindergarten education as an avenue for improving school outcomes for all children. In Sweden a similar shift has occurred. The system was created to support families in having children in an effort to stabilize the birth rate. These

services are now under the auspice of the education ministry in recognition of the importance of the early years as the beginning of a lifelong learning process.

Fourth, all of the countries are concerned about the transition that children face as they move between early childhood education and care and elementary school. In most of these countries there are ongoing efforts to understand and improve this transition, without sacrificing essential qualities belonging to either setting. Germany is experimenting with transitional classes and with the new *Bildungshäuser* for children ages three to ten. The United States has seen a dual interest in children's readiness for school and schools' readiness for children, and there is a growing movement toward PreK–3rd grade schools that focus on the developmental needs of younger children.

In this regard, Hans-Guenther Rossbach raised an interesting point of view that challenged our thinking. He said that we think in terms of continuity, but maybe discontinuity is not always bad for children. Children are proud when they make the move to the “big school.” So, maybe we should not be as concerned with eliminating the challenges of the transition as with helping children meet the challenges. France offers an interesting example, where the second cycle of three years includes the transition from *école maternelle* to elementary school. In a sense, the discontinuity between settings provides an opportunity for mastery which could contribute to the development of the child's identity.

In fact, a fifth commonality is the clear interest in a number of countries in preserving a distinct early childhood sector. Many countries seem to look at five- and even six-year-olds as preschoolers. The government of Japan wants an educational system that helps students to be successful in the world economy, but also wants to promote enjoyment of life and the development of individual talents in a society that is very competitive. Protecting kindergarten and nursery programs from the competitive culture of schools is part of this effort. In Sweden a conscious

effort was made to keep preschool for children age one to five separate from school even while bringing these services under the education umbrella. In New Zealand they actively reject the term preschool, but use the term early childhood education. There is concern in the United States that kindergarten has become too academically focused, and there is active debate about how to include even younger children in the public education system without exposing them to inappropriate instructional practices.

Sixth, while all countries are relying more and more on government to pay for early childhood education, countries rely on different levels of government for this support and for policies that establish and govern the programs. In the United States we will decide state by state or community by community how we serve children prior to kindergarten. Countries with more centralized national systems, as opposed to the federal systems of the US and Germany, have tended to develop their early childhood systems more uniformly, as would be expected. The reality in the United States is that the combination of state governments and a network of local authorities, including local school boards and social service agencies, create a mosaic of services that varies considerably from place to place. In Japan, kindergarten is education and nursery schools are social services, and efforts to integrate the two systems are instructive for us. Such efforts are difficult even in a situation with a relatively centralized national government. New Zealand has a diverse array of locally-based options for families of young children, which now operate within a national structure of funding and standards. New Zealand presents a useful case study for us in how to embrace multiple systems, supporting a diversity of providers but having a unified vision. To point the way forward, they focused on identifying the commonalities. Within the national curriculum, people can see reflected their type of service or their type of center, even though they do things quite differently.

The importance of early childhood education to the long term well being of society is accepted but its promise is yet to be fulfilled. Just as we have learned from one another about theories of learning, curriculum, and design of programs in the past, we can learn from the policy solutions proposed by other countries as we face common challenges and make choices that will affect children, families, and our society for generations to come.

Notes

Adapted from the book *Beginning School: US Policies in International Perspective*, edited by Richard M. Clifford & Gisele M. Crawford, © 2009, Teachers College Press.

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*In Germany, the word *Kindergarten* is capitalized. We uphold that convention out of deference to Friedrich Froebel.

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