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REPORT ON A DISCUSSION MEETING ON CHILD READINESS PROFILES IN DEVELOPING NATIONS

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Report on a Discussion Meeting on Child Readiness Profiles in Developing Nations

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Introduction

Child development and education experts from more than 10 nations met in Washington, D.C. on October 28-29, 1991 to discuss school readiness and the chances of generating "readiness profiles" in several "Third World" nations. The group met at the Academy for Educational Development, under the auspices of the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. The United States government had recently declared universal school readiness to be one of six National Education Goals toward which the U.S. educational system should strive. The organizers of the meeting, Robert Myers of the Consultative Group, and Frank Method of U.S. A.I.D., saw this as an opportunity to advance the construction of indicators of child well-being in the developing world.

The discussion focused on trying to answer several basic questions, such as:

How much agreement was there among the participants as to the need for child readiness profiles in their respective countries or regions?

What purposes would such profiles serve?

What cautions should be kept in mind in developing and applying the profiles?

What would the essential components of a profile be?

What criteria should be applied in selecting specific measures for each component in a given national setting?

How feasible is it to develop parallel profiles that assess the readiness of school systems to serve the nation's population of young children?

What steps should be taken to begin to carry out readiness assessments in several developing countries?

The Need for Readiness Profiles

Most of the participants endorsed the notion of having a group of indicators of the developmental status of young children at the age at which most children enter formal schooling. However, many raised questions similar to those raised by early education experts in the U.S. For example, participants preferred a label like "whole child assessment" to the term "readiness profile," because the latter implied that some children were ready for school while others were not. Others expressed concern about using scarce resources to assess children's status without doing more to improve conditions. There was also concern about the creation of de facto standards that would be misused to exclude or track certain children in the schools.

Purposes of the Profiles

Despite these concerns, there was general appreciation that the principal purpose of the profiles would be to describe where the child population of a nation is with respect to a multi-faceted set of indicators that go beyond the criterion of mere survival. The indicators should reflect the quality of the care and nurturance the children have received prior to arriving at school, and tell something about the success of policies and programs aimed at improving resources, services, and home environments for young children. The profiles should not be used as a selection device or to diagnose the needs or impairments of individual youngsters. They could be used, though, to assist in the evaluation of programs and interventions, and to identify specific groups of children who may need special assistance. They could also be used constructively in advocating and promoting new or expanded programs for children.

Cautions To Be Observed In Developing Profiles

The first caveat stressed by meeting participants was, as already noted, that the profiles not be used to exclude some young children from formal schooling. A second admonition was that profiles be broad enough to assess children's readiness not just for school, but for life in the nation in question. A third caution was not to leave schools themselves out of the readiness appraisal. Schools can and should change to be more responsive to children's needs.

Essential Components of A Readiness Profile

The meeting participants gave a strong endorsement to the "whole child perspective" on readiness that was adopted by the Resource Group to the U.S. National Education Goals Panel. This position argues that how well a child does in school depends on more than the child's general knowledge and intellectual development. It depends as well on the child's physical health, emotional well-being, and social development. Thus, a profile should contain components reflecting these multiple facets of readiness, including information about children's:

health, physical growth, and motor development;

emotional security;

social confidence;

interest, engagement, approach to learning; and

language fluency;

as well as assessments of:

cognitive development, general knowledge, and specific skills.

The group also endorsed the notion that readiness profiles should make use of multiple sources of information, including:

reports from parents, about such matters as their aspirations and expectations for the child's education, instructional resources and activities in the home, the child's health status and medical history, and developmental delays and problem behavior, if any;

direct observation of the child's general appearance, cleanliness and grooming, presence of apparent handicaps, and obvious indications of malnutrition or maltreatment;

traditional developmental screening procedures, such as measurement of height for age, weight for height, hearing, and vision;

testing and assessment of children, both with regard to the development of general cognitive capabilities, as well as the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills that are relevant to the elementary school curriculum;

reports or ratings from teachers, after they have had a chance to get to know individual children in the classroom setting, regarding such matters as the child's ability to sit quietly and pay attention, task persistence, enthusiasm for learning, general mood, and cooperation with and concern for feelings of other pupils.

Unlike the U.S. National Goals Panel, which has tended to emphasize the direct assessment of children and their capabilities, the international group placed equal weight on the gathering of information about the life circumstances of young children, both with respect to their home environments and to community resources and services that are relevant to children's physical health and growth, intellectual development, social behavior, and emotional well-being. Their was general agreement that measures of the living conditions in which young children develop should be an integral part of any readiness profile.

There was a lively discussion as to whether the formation of a positive self-concept was an essential ingredient for school readiness and wholesome child development. Several participants felt that it was, whereas others noted that recent research has found that groups who show the highest academic achievement do not necessarily always score highest on self-esteem measures. Evidence from the work of Harold Stevenson and others suggests that belief in one's ability to learn and succeed through hard work, strong family ties, and even obedience to societal standards and norms may be more important for academic success than a positive self-image. In any event, self-concept is difficult to assess reliably in preschool and early elementary-school pupils.

Criteria To Be Applied In Choosing Measures for the Profile

The group recommended that the following criteria be used in selecting measures to appraise various aspects of child well-being:

that the measure be acceptable to the culture in question;

that the measure meet traditional standards for reliability and validity;

that the measure be appropriate to the nation's stage of development (i.e., there is little use for measures which are not likely to show much change in the foreseeable future);

that the variable be easily measured or observed, especially if data collection is likely to occur in relatively primitive or difficult conditions; and,

that the information on which the measure is based be capable of being provided by a parent or obtained by a para-professional.

There was also discussion about whether it was necessary to have only measures that could be scaled on absolute metrics that were comparable from one nation to the next. The group concluded that while having an absolute metric was desirable, this criterion should not be used to exclude measures in developmental domains that are difficult to measure in absolute terms, such as children's social maturity and emotional well-being. More effort should be devoted to developing procedures for anchoring or calibrating parent or teacher ratings of child behavior and other subjective measures. One way of doing this is to provide videotapes that show extremes of child behavior and to have parents or teachers rate the subject child's behavior with respect to these anchor points.

Assessing the Readiness of School Systems

During the second day of the meeting, the group considered how to assess the readiness not of children, but of school systems to accept and educate the child population of a nation. Among the elements that should be included in such an assessment are:

the **access to school** that various groups of children have, both in theory and in actuality, when the realities of location, travel times, obstacles posed by climate and weather conditions, presence of teachers, and the availability of desks and other basic equipment are considered;

the **quality of the schools**, including the question of whether the least able teachers are assigned to teach the primary grades;

the **responsiveness of the schools** to pupil diversity, as shown in the match between the language of instruction and the languages spoken by different groups of children, the appropriateness of the books used, etc.;

teacher expectations regarding the ability of different kinds of children to benefit from the instruction provided;

the extent of **outreach to parents**, as shown by whether teachers communicate their expectations regarding pupil preparation to parents, and whether they make any attempt to find out about conditions in the home and give advice as to what parents can do to help children learn.

As far as assessing the quality of schools in the primary grades, research on early education in the United States has found that three useful indicators of quality are:

group size, that is, the average number of children in a class or instructional cluster;

pupil/teacher ratio, the number of pupils divided by the number of adults in the program who are actually engaged in instructional activities; and

teacher preparation in early childhood education.

Other indicators that seem promising as markers of program quality are measures of:

teacher competence, such as achievement test scores or the calibre of the schools from which teachers received their undergraduate degrees;

teacher warmth, i.e., whether teachers actually like working with young children;

teacher experience in early education or related activities with young children;

teacher career plans, i.e, whether teachers want to remain in teaching or are trying to leave it as soon as they can; and,

teacher attitudes with regard to the use of developmentally appropriate practices in the early grades.

Another rough gauge of program quality is the amount of money spent per pupil. There is no guarantee that the money is being <u>well</u> spent, of course. Furthermore, some of the funds may be going for administrative expenses that have little to do with the instruction children receive. Several participants bemoaned the difficulty of coming up with meaningful per-pupil expenditures in developing countries and suggested ways of making these figures more useful.

The group discussed the issue of what children should be educated for in developing countries where there may be few job openings for graduates with traditional

academic knowledge and skills. A related criterion for school assessments is the responsiveness of the school system to the needs and demands of the local economy and ecology. The group also considered ways of assessing the organization of school systems to determine if there are problems such as rigidity or over-centralization. Participants endorsed the usefulness of criteria for the quality and efficiency of school systems that had been developed by Marlene Lockheed for the World Bank. Also mentioned as useful were standards for the physical school environment developed by UNESCO.

Next Steps

The possibility of moving beyond discussions of readiness profiles to actual attempts to implement such assessments in several nations depends on the enthusiasm of the relevant government agencies and other funding organizations. Robert Myers felt encouraged at the extent of agreement at the meeting on the desirability of carrying out assessments and the elements the profiles should contain. At the same time, there was tension between the competing purposes of developing descriptive profiles versus taking steps to educate families and make school systems more responsive to children's needs.

Myers saw two ways of going. One is to work in two-to-four national settings, begin the process of defining sets of indicators suitable for each nation, and then move to put assessments in the field. This would probably be easiest to do on a sample basis, rather than for all children and schools in the nation.

The second way is to tie readiness assessment systems to childhood intervention programs, as part of the process of evaluating the impact of the programs. Again, there would be a locally chosen set of indicators that would be defined and measured, both before the program got underway and then again after the program had been in operation for several years. One pitfall here is that the assessment system might be too closely tied to the specific intervention, and the continuation of the assessment might be jeopardized if the program proved to be of little value.

Myers promised to explore the possibilities for both these avenues of support and to report back to the group at a future date.

ASSESSING THE SCHOOL READINESS OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES

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Exhibits prepared for

DISCUSSION MEETING ON A CHILD READINESS PROFILE

Academy of Education Development (AED)

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NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS

UNIVERSAL SCHOOL READINESS

90% HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION

DEMONSTRATED SUBJECT MATTER COMPETENCY IN GRADES FOUR, EIGHT, AND TWELVE, AND INCREASED STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVITIES THAT PROMOTE GOOD CITIZENSHIP

U.S. FIRST IN THE WORLD IN SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT

UNIVERSAL ADULT LITERACY AND LIFELONG LEARNING

SAFE, DISCIPLINED, AND DRUG-FREE SCHOOLS

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SCHOOL READINESS GOAL:

"BY THE YEAR 2000, ALL CHILDREN IN AMERICA WILL START SCHOOL READY TO LEARN."

SUBSIDIARY OBJECTIVES

Universal access for disadvantaged and disabled children to high quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs

Every parent to devote time each day to help preschool children learn

Parents to have access to training and support they need to be child's first teacher

Children to receive nutrition and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies

Significant reduction in number of low birthweight babies

a

CRITICISMS OF READINESS GOAL

ALL CHILDREN <u>ARE</u> READY TO LEARN

FEAR THAT READINESS TESTS WILL BE USED TO EXCLUDE OR TRACK YOUNG CHILDREN

SCHOOLS SHOULD BE READY TO DEAL WITH CHILDREN'S VARIED NEEDS AND LEARNING STYLES

READINESS GOAL DRAWS ATTENTION TO SEVERAL IMPORTANT POINTS

HOW CHILDREN DO IN SCHOOL DEPENDS IN LARGE MEASURE ON THINGS THAT HAPPEN BEFORE THEY EVER SET FOOT IN CLASSROOM

HOW CHILDREN DO IN SCHOOL DEPENDS ON MORE THAN JUST THEIR COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT ("WHOLE CHILD" PERSPECTIVE)

SCHOOLS CAN DO MORE IF MINIMUM LEVELS OF PUPIL PREPARATION AND CONDUCT CAN BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED (RESOURCES DEVOTED TO REMEDIATION AND DISCIPLINE REDUCE RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR OTHER PUPILS)

SCHOOLS CANNOT BE EXPECTED TO SOLVE ALL OF SOCIETY'S PROBLEMS

CONDITIONS PRIOR TO SCHOOL ENTRY THAT INFLUENCE CHILD'S CHANCES OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

GENETIC ENDOWMENT

PRENATAL CONDITIONS

CIRCUMSTANCES OF BIRTH

EARLY NUTRITION AND MEDICAL CARE

EARLY FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

CHILD CARE AND PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

WHOLE CHILD PERSPECTIVE

HOW CHILD DOES IN SCHOOL AFFECTED BY MORE THAN JUST HIS OR HER COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

- PHYSICAL WELL-BEING
- EMOTIONAL SECURITY
- SOCIAL CONFIDENCE
- LANGUAGE FLUENCY
- INTEREST, ENGAGEMENT, APPROACH TO LEARNING
- GENERAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

WHERE DOES THE NATION STAND WITH RESPECT TO SCHOOL READINESS?

NO DIRECT ASSESSMENT OF THE SCHOOL READINESS OF U.S. CHILDREN IS CURRENTLY AVAILABLE

BUT WE KNOW A LOT FROM "INDIRECT" INDICATORS

SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

VITAL STATISTICS

CENSUS BUREAU'S OCTOBER ENROLLMENT SURVEY

STATE COUNTS OF PARTICIPATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHILDREN

NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL SURVEY OF YOUTH

NATIONAL HEALTH INTERVIEW SURVEY ON CHILD HEALTH

NATIONAL HOUSEHOLD EDUCATION SURVEY

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL READINESS OF U.S. CHILDREN

SIZABLE MINORITIES SPEND THEIR EARLY CHILDHOODS IN CIRCUMSTANCES THAT PUT THEM AT EDUCATIONAL RISK

NEARLY ONE-QUARTER OF BABIES BORN EACH YEAR IS BORN TO A MOTHER WHO HAS NOT COMPLETED HIGH SCHOOL

ONE IN EIGHT BORN TO A TEENAGED MOTHER

ONE IN FOURTEEN BORN AT LOW BIRTH WEIGHT

MORE THAN FIVE MILLION PRESCHOOL CHILDREN -- 23 PERCENT -- ARE LIVING IN POVERTY

NEARLY SIX-AND-A-HALF MILLION PRESCHOOL CHILDREN -- 28 PERCENT -- ARE NOT LIVING WITH BOTH BIRTH PARENTS

ASSESSING READINESS

(Resource Group Recommendations)

A. BEFORE SCHOOL ASSESSMENT

1. Health and Nutrition Factors

   a. Birth Weight and Prenatal Care

   b. Nutritional Status of Children

   c. Access to Health Care

2. Home and Parenting Conditions

   a. Parental status

   b. Home activities

   c. Parenting education programs

3. Child Care and Preschool Programs

   a. Participation in Preschool

   b. Quality of Preschool

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ASSESSING READINESS

(Resource Group Recommendations, continued)

B. SCHOOL ENTRANCE ASSESSMENT

1. National School Entry Form

   a. Collect information from parents on child's birth, health, language, household and family life, daycare and preschool experiences.

   b. Advise parents of their responsibilities and where they can seek training or support.

2. National Health Screening Form

   a. Collect information about child's vision, hearing, immunizations, general health and special disabilities.

   b. Combination of parent report and assessment by school nurse or physician's assistant.

C. IN-SCHOOL ASSESSMENT

1. Child Development Profile

2. Parent Report

3. Teacher Observations

4. Performance Portfolios

KEY ISSUES IN ASSESSMENT OF READINESS

PROPRIETY OF ASSESSING WITHOUT DOING MORE TO BOOST READINESS

INSTABILITY OF DEVELOPMENTAL MEASURES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

EXISTING SCREENING INSTRUMENTS MISS CHILDREN WHO LATER TURN OUT TO HAVE LEARNING PROBLEMS

CHILDREN AT HIGHEST RISK MAY NOT HAVE PARENT FIGURE WHO CAN ACT AS RELIABLE INFORMANT

FEARS THAT ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE WILL BECOME DE FACTO STANDARD AND BE MISUSED TO EXCLUDE OR TRACK INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN

WHEN SHOULD ASSESSMENT BE DONE? (WHAT GRADE?)

LACK OF ADEQUATE INSTRUMENTS "ON THE SHELF" FOR AT LEAST SOME ASSESSMENT COMPONENTS

PROPER MIX OF COMPONENTS (DIRECT ASSESSMENT, PARENT REPORT, TEACHER REPORT, PERFORMANCE PORTFOLIOS)

UNIVERSAL RECORD SYSTEM VERSUS ASSESSMENT OF A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF CHILDREN

- Questions about appropriate sampling strategy

POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF SCHOOL READINESS ASSESSMENTS

PROVIDE FEEDBACK TO NATION ON SUCCESS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS (MEDICAL CARE, SOCIAL SERVICES, CHILD CARE, PRESCHOOL EDUCATION)

EMPHASIZE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF NATION'S CHILDREN

ENCOURAGE COOPERATION BETWEEN MEDICAL, EDUCATIONAL, AND SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES

HELP INFORM PARENTS ON WHAT IS EXPECTED OF THEM TO PREPARE CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL

MOTIVATE SCHOOLS TO DO MORE TO REACH OUT TO PARENTS PRIOR TO START OF FORMAL SCHOOLING

ENCOURAGE SCHOOLS TO ACKNOWLEDGE VARIED NEEDS OF YOUNG CHILDREN AND ADOPT DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

EMPHASIZE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTING EDUCATION

ENCOURAGE USE OF GOVERNMENT FUNDS FOR PREVENTION RATHER THAN REMEDIATION

TECHNICAL ADVISORY GROUP TO NATIONAL GOALS PANEL

REJECTED NOTION OF A READINESS TEST, ESPECIALLY ONE THAT COULD BE USED TO EXCLUDE SOME CHILDREN FROM SCHOOL

ENDORSED AN EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSESSMENT THAT COULD BE USED (ON A SAMPLE BASIS) TO MEASURE PROGRESS TOWARD READINESS GOAL

- Multiple assessment dimensions
- Multiple information sources:

  Parent Report
  Teacher Ratings
  Direct Child Assessment
  Performance Portfolios

- Applied to probability samples of kindergarten students (as in National Assessment of Educational Progress)
- National Commission to guide development of assessment

POSSIBLE STEPS TO IMPROVING READINESS

WORK WITH FAMILIES OF DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN TO ENRICH HOME ENVIRONMENTS

EXPAND PARTICIPATION IN PRESCHOOL AND TRANSITION PROGRAMS

UPGRADE QUALITY OF PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

INSTEAD OF MOVING TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC APPROACH DOWN TO PRESCHOOL YEARS, MOVE DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH UP TO EARLY ELEMENTARY GRADES

CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES IN MOST MAJOR U.S. CITIES IN DISARRAY -- NEED FOR INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO HIGH-RISK FAMILIES

PREVENT FORMATION OF HIGH-RISK FAMILIES

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