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Quality education through Child-Friendly Schools: resource allocation for the protection of children's rights

Introduction

The paper discusses the idea and purpose of Child-Friendly Schools (CFSs) initiated by the UNICEF. It analyses the implications of CFSs in terms of improving children's health and nutrition, promoting gender equality, protecting children's rights, re-defining education quality and creating positive psycho-emotional environment at schools.

Definition / purpose

Child-friendly school, or CFS, is UNICEF's approach to promoting quality education in schools for all children – especially among the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations – both in everyday circumstances and in emergencies. Child-friendly educators focus on the needs of the 'whole' child (which include his or her health, nutrition and overall well-being) and care about what happens to children in their families and communities before they enter school and after they leave.

CFSs imply designing world class schools that inspire a love of learning and create a sense of harmony between the school, the surrounding community and the environment.

CFSs also promote healthy, safe and protective environment for children's emotional, psychological and physical well-being, both in primary and secondary schools – especially for girls.

Another program related to Child Friendly School initiative is conducted by **Architecture for Humanity** in partnership with UNICEF, which involves the design and construction of an innovative school program in post-conflict border areas of Western Africa. This includes building two prototype facilities, a primary school and a secondary school, in each location that incorporate the guidelines of UNICEF's Child Friendly School approach. Each school will include innovative learning environments, but will incorporate alternative energy sources, water reclamation, basic services play spaces, and will serve as a model for sustainable development in the region.

Below are some examples of Child Friendly School initiatives in Sub-Saharan African countries and regions.

Rwanda

UNICEF and local partners promote child-friendly schools in Kigali, Rwanda. Rubingo Primary School in Gasabo District, approximately 20 km from Kigali City, has all the

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hallmarks of a child-friendly school. Six new classrooms have been constructed and equipped with learning materials for orphans and vulnerable children, and teacher-training courses have been organized. UNICEF has provided a water tank where students can wash their hands, and drinking water is available in all classrooms. There are separate latrines for girls and boys. An engaged parents' committee co-manages the school and helps to ensure protection of the children.

Rubingo Primary School is recognized for its good performance. Records show that 616 girls and 610 boys are currently enrolled. The estimated drop-out rate for this school year is 1 %. And Rubingo students' transition rates from primary to secondary school have increased from 56 % in 2004 to 69 % in 2006. Ranked first in Gasabo District in 2003-04, Rubingo generated the district's two top-ranked female students in 2004; the girls received the First Lady's Award for achievement.

Right to Play, an international NGO, promotes sports for development – central to the CFS model – in the school as part of its psychosocial support role. Both girls and boys are encouraged to participate in sports activities, and playgrounds are being rehabilitated by parents.

"The CFS model has not only created conducive school environment for reconciliation, healing and hope, but has also helped to increase school enrolment and retention," said UNICEF's Representative in Rwanda, Dr. Joseph Foumbi. "Children, especially girls, are more motivated to stay in school.

Mozambique

Beyond the physical construction of classrooms, more development is going on at the Namurumo Primary School, situated in the heart of Maganja da Costa, one of the poorest districts in the central province of Zambézia, Mozambique.

"We can't remove all the problems in the education system, not in years, but we can assist with some fundamental changes that can improve the quality of education," said UNICEF Project Officer Stella Kaabwe.

Ms. Kaabwe explained how UNICEF supports the Ministry of Education in creating 'child-friendly schools', which call on all sectors – notably education, health, water and sanitation, social welfare and communication – to improve student retention and performance even in the poorest communities.

One of the major priorities, said the Director of the Namurumo Primary School, Fazilom Ofumawe, is to retain girls and the increasing number of students who have been orphaned – mostly due to HIV/AIDS.

Framework for Child Friendly Schools

UNICEF has developed a framework for rights-based, child-friendly educational systems and schools that are characterized as "inclusive, healthy and protective for all children, effective with children, and involved with families and communities - and children". Within this framework:

- The school is a significant personal and social environment in the lives of its students. A child-friendly school ensures every child an environment that is physically safe, emotionally secure and psychologically enabling.
- Teachers are the single most important factor in creating an effective and inclusive classroom.
- Children are natural learners, but this capacity to learn can be undermined and sometimes destroyed. A child-friendly school recognizes, encourages and supports children's growing capacities as learners by providing a school culture, teaching behaviours and curriculum content that are focused on learning and the learner.
- The ability of a school to be and to call itself child-friendly is directly linked to the support, participation and collaboration it receives from families.
- Child-friendly schools aim to develop a learning environment in which children are motivated and able to learn. Staff members are friendly and welcoming to children and attend to all their health and safety needs.

Recommendations

All social systems and agencies which affect children should be based on the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is particularly true for schools which, despite disparities in access across much of the world, serve a large percentage of children of primary school age. Such rights-based — or child-friendly — schools not only help children realize their right to a basic education of good quality. They are also needed to do many other things — help children learn what they need to learn to face the challenges of the new century; enhance their health and well-being; guarantee them safe and protective spaces for learning, free from violence and abuse; raise teacher morale and motivation; and mobilize community support for education.

Above all, a rights-based, child-friendly school must reflect an environment of good quality characterized by several essential aspects:

It is **inclusive of children** — it:
- Does not exclude, discriminate, or stereotype on the basis of difference.
- Provides education that is free and compulsory, affordable and accessible, especially to families and children at risk.
- Respects diversity and ensures equality of learning for all children (e.g., girls, working children, children of ethnic minorities and affected by HIV/AIDS, children with disabilities, victims of exploitation and violence).
- Responds to diversity by meeting the differing circumstances and needs of children (e.g., based on gender, social class, ethnicity, and ability level).

It is **effective for learning** — it:

▪ Promotes good quality teaching and learning processes with individualized instruction appropriate to each child's developmental level, abilities, and learning style and with active, cooperative, and democratic learning methods.

▪ Provides structured content and good quality materials and resources.

▪ Enhances teacher capacity, morale, commitment, status, and income — and their own recognition of child rights.

▪ Promotes quality learning outcomes by defining and helping children learn what they need to learn and teaching them how to learn; and defines suitable ways to assess them, at classroom and national levels.

It is **healthy and protective of children** — it:

▪ Ensures a healthy, hygienic, and safe learning environment, with adequate water and sanitation facilities and healthy classrooms, healthy policies and practices (e.g., a school free of drugs, corporal punishment, and harassment), and the provision of health services such as nutritional supplementation and counseling.

▪ Provides life skills-based health education.

▪ Promotes both the physical and the psycho-socio-emotional health of teachers and learners.

▪ Helps to defend and protect all children from abuse and harm.

▪ Provides positive experiences for children.

It is **gender-sensitive** — it:

▪ Promotes gender equality in enrolment and achievement.

▪ Eliminates gender stereotypes.

▪ Guarantees girl-friendly facilities, curricula, textbooks, and teaching-learning processes.

▪ Encourages respect for each others' rights, dignity, and equality.

It is **involved with children, families, and communities** — it is:

▪ Child-centered - promoting child participation in all aspects of school life.

▪ Family-focused — working to strengthen families as the child's primary caregivers and educators and helping children, parents, and teachers establish harmonious relationships.

▪ Community-based - encouraging local partnership in education, acting in the community for the sake of children, and working with other actors to ensure the fulfillment of children' rights.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A RIGHTS-BASED, CHILD-FRIENDLY SCHOOL

1. Reflects and realizes the rights of every child -- cooperates with other partners to promote and monitor the well-being and rights of all children; defends and protects all children from abuse and harm (as a sanctuary), both inside and outside the school.

2. Is child-centered -- encourages participation, creativity, self-esteem, and psycho-social well-being; promotes a structured, child-centered curriculum and teaching-learning methods appropriate to the child's developmental level, abilities, and learning style; and considers the needs of children over the needs of the other actors in the system.

3. Is gender-sensitive and girl-friendly – promotes parity in the enrolment and achievement of girls and boys; reduces constraints to constraints to gender equity and eliminates gender stereotypes; provides facilities, curricula, and learning processes welcoming to girls.

4. Promotes quality learning outcomes -- encourages children to think critically, ask questions, express their opinions -- and learn how to learn; helps children master the essential enabling skills of writing, reading, speaking, listening, and mathematics and the general knowledge and skills required for living in the new century -- including useful traditional knowledge and the values of peace, democracy, and the acceptance of diversity.

5. Provides education based on the reality of children's lives -- ensures that curricular content responds to the learning needs of individual children as well as to the general objectives of the education system and the local context and traditional knowledge of families and the community.

6. Is flexible and responds to diversity -- meets differing circumstances and needs of children (e.g., as determined by gender, culture, social class, ability level).

7. Acts to ensure inclusion, respect, and equality of opportunity for all children -- does not stereotype, exclude, or discriminate on the basis of difference.

8. Promotes mental and physical health – provides emotional support, encourages healthy behaviours and practices, and guarantees a hygienic, safe, secure, and joyful environment.

9. Provides education that is affordable and accessible -- especially to children and families most at-risk.

10. Enhances teacher capacity, morale, commitment, and status -- ensures that its teachers have sufficient pre-service training, in-service support and professional development, status, and income.

11. Is family focused -- attempts to work with and strengthen families and helps children, parents and teachers establish harmonious, collaborative partnerships.

12. Is community-based -- strengthens school governance through a decentralized, community-based approach; encourages parents, local government, community organizations, and other institutions of civil society to participate in the management as well as the financing of education; promotes community partnerships and networks focused on the rights and well-being of children.

Conclusion

Experience is now showing that a framework of rights-based, child-friendly schools can be a powerful tool for both helping to fulfill the rights of children and providing them an education of good quality. At the national level, for ministries, development agencies, and civil society organizations, the framework can be used as a normative goal for policies and programmes leading to child-friendly systems and environments, as a focus for collaborative programming leading to greater resource allocations for education, and as a component of staff training. At the community level, for school staff, parents, and other community members, the framework can serve as both a goal and a tool of quality improvement through localized self-assessment, planning, and management and as a means for mobilizing the community around education and child rights.

A rights-based, child-friendly school: above all -- has <u>an environment of good quality</u>

- **Inclusive of children**
- **Effective with children**
- **Healthy and protective for children**
- **Gender-sensitive**
- **Involved with children, families, and communities**

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