

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

An Overview of the Pre-School Education in Morocco

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Abstract:

It is scientifically recognised that the first years of life, until 8, are crucial for the intellectual, affective and social development of human beings and that the path followed during the childhood represents either a solid or a weak base, through which the future development of the child will be built. Therefore, investing in pre-school education is extremely important because it generates positives effects not only on the successful learning level registered at school, but also on the evolution of the child towards being an adult and a good citizen, which will generally contribute to an effective development of the nation. This paper gives a snapshot of the situation of pre-school education in Morocco. It mainly provides an understanding of the main characteristics of this area and the projects proposed for a better pre-school education for Moroccan children.

Keywords: Morocco, pre-school education

1. Pre-School Education in Morocco

Pre-school education in Morocco interests children of four and five year-olds. It is under the supervision of the Ministry of National Education and it is still not compulsory. With respect to Education for All (EFA) vision of Learning begins at birth (UNESCO, 2007), the Moroccan concept of "pre-school education" is therefore different because it starts later.

El Hassan El Yazidi, Chief of the Division of the Promotion of Private Education in the Ministry of National Education of the country, in 2004 declared that in the Moroccan society, children under age of four are not viewed as a target group for organised educational activity and the family is the main responsible for doing such activity, where the Ministry of National Education is not involved (Choi, 2004). The main reforms that over the last years have interested the Education and Training system in Morocco concerned also the pre-school, which is recognised as a fundamental stage of the education and an essential phase for the social, intellectual and affective development of the human being. The national policies and reforms concerning the sector can be summarized in the following:

1. The National Charter for Education and Training that considers the generalisation of the schooling for early childhood as a fundamental objective of the education system reform (art. 24); it includes the new structure of the primary education system and underlines the general objectives of the pre-school and primary teaching. In fact, in order to clarify the role of the pre-school and the final objective of the school, the educator needs to have a clear knowledge of the different stages of the education.
2. The 05-00 law, named "The Basic Status of Pre-school Education" detached pre-school education of 4 and 5 year-olds from the General Private Education Law and specifies which are the conditions to open a new pre-school, its obligations, the profile of the educators, the control procedures and the sanctions to which they are submitted (Choi, 2004). One of the highlights of this new law is the fact that the government will leave the provision of pre-school education in the hand of the private sector. On the contrary the government will focus its attention on regulations, trainings and pedagogical innovations. The new law stipulates also an incentive system of the government (tax benefit, subsidies, or other form of support) to encourage private agencies, such as families, communities, NGOs, enterprises and for-profit service providers to open pre-schools and to accelerate the expansion of pre-school education.
3. The decree n° 2.00.1014 of the Ministry of National Education (MNE) specifies the conditions to open a new pre-school, the rules that the new institution has to respect, the profile of the educator and the modalities of the trainings to be provided by the Regional Academy for Education and Training (AREF), the pedagogical obligations and the potential contribution of the AREF.
4. The decree n°1535-03 of the MNE specifies the law 05-00 by fixing the pedagogical commitment and by giving clear details about the spaces to be ensured, the equipment of the schools and the administrative conditions which have to be respected by the personnel.

As mentioned by the National Charter for Education and Training, the pre-school education is opened to children from four to six years of age and its main objective is to foster, over the two years, children's physical, cognitive and social-emotional development and to develop their autonomy and their socialization through the: (1) development of sensory-motor skills, spatial-temporal-semiotic, imaginative and expressive skills, (2) introduction to religious, ethical and civic values, (3) exercise of

elementary practical and artistic activities (drawing, sculpture, modelling, painting, role playing games, song and music) and finally (4) activities to prepare the child for learning to read and write in Arabic, having the command of spoken Arabic with the support of the use of the native languages, like the Amazigh berber language.

Despite all these regulations and ambitious reforms, the pre-school education system in Morocco is still very complex and it has the following characteristics: (1) it is nearly 100% privately oriented because in terms of numbers the public institutions are basically irrelevant (Choi, 2004), (2) at a structural level, it is characterised by a high level of segmentation; there are different kinds of institutions, each of them under the supervision of a different administrative agency as there are different kinds of contents, practises and languages of teaching.

In fact, the dichotomy between the Moroccan institutions is not in terms of public/private but in terms of traditional/modern. Three different types of institutions offer pre-school education: the koranic schools, the modern pre-school institutions and the kindergartens. The koranic schools are divided in two categories: the *m'sid* under the supervision of the Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs and the pre-school *kouttabs* under the control of the Education Support Office of the Ministry of National Education. The *m'sid* is usually located close to the mosque and its main objective is the religious education of the child. This structure is common in rural areas. The pre-school *kouttabs* can be considered as an institution between the *m'sid* and the kindergarten, not as modern as the latter but neither traditional like the *m'sid*.

The modern pre-school institutions can be either kindergarten or scholastic group. The scholastic group is a specific kind of institution that includes not only the pre-schooling but also the primary and sometimes the secondary school. The modern pre-school institutions are under the supervision of the Cooperation and Promotion of Private Teaching Directory Board of the Ministry of National Education that provides the authorization. These institutions are often bilingual and they prefer a modern approach. Finally the kindergartens are called also *garderies* (nurseries), *club d'enfants* or *crèches*. They are under the supervision of the Ministry of Youth and Sport, the Ministry of Employment and Welfare, non-governmental organisations or other local associations (ATFALE, 1998). These institutions receive the majority of the children in pre-school age and they are private. Parents have to pay to the institution fees. For such a reason the choice of the pre-school depends on its cost and on the economic capacity of the family. In fact, the cost can vary from 50 up to 2.000 Dirham, (5 Euro/ 200 Euro) per month depending on the type and the quality of the pre-school (El Andaloussi and Faiq, 2008).

Actually, according to the Education Emergency Program *Najah* 2009-2012, the Moroccan pre-school system is facing several difficulties and obstacles, such as: (1) the low level of literacy, especially in rural areas: only 59,7% of children of 4-5 years old received a pre-school education (28,5% girls in rural areas), and among them 80% attended the *kouttabs* (koranic schools) several in rural areas where the didactic program cannot be identified as one of a modern pre-schooling, (2) the lack of infrastructures and basic equipments: in 2006-2007 Morocco had about 46.000 pre-school classes that were receiving more than 705.000 children, a number extremely inferior to the national pre-schooling population of about 1,2 million children, (3) the huge diversity in the pre-school curricula, both regarding the content and the activities, as well as the methods and the didactic material used, (4) the different profiles and the insufficient professional skills of the educators, (5) the lack of coordination among the different stakeholders of the sector, (6) the limited amount of economic resources and responsibility of institutions, especially in rural areas. Moreover, as underlined by other experts of the sector, the pre-school education in Morocco suffers from other important deficiencies. As the sector is mainly private, the investors prefer the urban zones rather than the rural ones. The majority of the educators that work in the sector have never received a specific training in the early childhood education and for this reason the pre-school pedagogical vision is left at the personal interpretation of the owners of the infrastructure (ATFALE, 2008).

In fact, the main stakeholders are the privates, whose institutions in 2007 received more than 96% of the total children, followed by the public institutions of the National Mutual Aid (*Entraide Nationale*), the Ministry of Youth and Sport as well as those of the foreign Embassies in Morocco, like the French, which receive a very limited number of children and their didactic offer depends on their country of origin (El Andaloussi and Faiq, 2008). Disparities exist also among girls and boys, in rural and urban areas. In fact, according to the data of 2005-2006 of the Ministry of National Education at the national level the rate of attendance of boys and girls in the pre-school is 60% and 40% respectively, and this gap increases in the rural areas where the private institutions are almost inexistent. Girls are the most disadvantaged especially in the koranic schools *kouttabs* where they represent the 26% in the rural areas and 39% in the urban areas.

Concerning the human resources of the pre-schools, an investigation published in 2007 by Faiq and El Andaloussi (cited in El Andaloussi and Faiq, 2008), underlined that in 2006 there were about 40.000 educators for more than 700.000 children without any kind of training neither in education nor in pre-school pedagogy. In fact, the profile of the educators is extremely low: in urban and suburban areas they have reached only the 9th year of compulsory education, which means that they left school when they were 15 years old, while in the rural areas the majority of them have a koranic education (Chedati and Faiq, 2003).

Also, the segmentation of the sector concerns also the contents of the education and the teaching language used in the different institutions. The language used in the koranic schools *m'sid* is the classic Arabic and the teaching is focused on the learning of the Koran, on the reading the *sura* (koranic verse) written on a bevelled wood board. In the koranic *kouttabs* the teaching language is the classic Arabic but also French, following parents demand. The content of the lesson is simplified and it is mainly focused on the early learning of reading, writing and on maths. The kindergartens use both Arabic and French and their program is based on Arabic or foreigner manuals or national books written in a double language, Arabic and French.

2. Initiatives for Changing the Pre-School Education in Morocco

In Morocco, the pre-schooling has been involved in the incessant process of modernization of the education sector. Even if it is not compulsory and neither a public service, this cycle of education has been recognised as a fundamental and essential stage for the social, intellectual and affective development of human beings. Since the launch of the National Charter in 2005 the necessity

of guaranteeing the generalisation of the access to national pre-school education has been part of the national agenda. For this purpose the MNE decided to launch in 2008 a pilot experience by opening some public preschools all over the country. The idea was to make accessible to all parents, regardless of their income, a high quality service and involve by 2017 up to 50% of children aged 4 to 6 years (600.000).

Actually, according to the Moroccan Foundation for the promotion of the pre-school education (Fondation Marocaine pour la promotion de l'Enseignement préscolaire, 2010), 19 schools have been established to offer this service. Beside this initiative, there is also the possibility given by the MNE to open within public institutions of primary education some pre-school classes, managed by private associations.

The Education Emergency Plan Najah considered the development of a modern pre-school in the national territory as the first project among the 23 development projects identified in order to accelerate the realisation of the educational reform. Composed by 4 main areas of intervention, the development of pre-school education represented the first activity of the Plan, aimed to make effective the obligation of education until the age 15. The Emergency Plan recognised that, despite the obligations of the law 05-00, the pedagogical offer continued to be very heterogeneous. Furthermore, despite the fact that the resources centres were created with the ambition of developing a framework for the pre-school sector, their activity was still limited because they were under-equipped in terms of didactic and pedagogical tools, as well as in terms of human resources necessary to insure the quality of the service they should provide. (Conseil Supérieur de l'Enseignement, 2011).

For reaching such a purpose, the actions identified by the Emergency Plan Najah aimed to reach: (1) the modernization of the existing services by providing trainings to educators in order to update their knowledge and skills and with the intent to homogenize the education provided, by opening 9 new resources centres in the remaining delegations, in order to cover the full national territory, (2) the extension of the modern pre-school education in all the country. Due to the fact that in the rural disfavoured areas the private sector doesn't arrive, this extension depends on a strong commitment of the State, whereas in urban areas the private intervention is still considered fundamental and (3) the assurance of a better framework for the sector by creating a new structure in charge of putting in practice the strategy of development of the pre-school education and realize the monitoring and coordination among the different stakeholders and partners.

The results of the Emergency Plan were limited. For instance, data concerning primary school revealed that in three years have been built only 99 schools, representing the 27% of what the Emergent Plan expected to reach. As a consequence, in 2012 the new government launched the Medium Term Action Plan 2013-2016 so that it can get lessons from the implementation of the previous action plan.

Before the launch of the Emergency Plan and within the National Charter, the MNE launched in 2004 a pilot initiative to develop pre-school education by supporting educators. With the support of the French Cooperation, UNICEF and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation (International Foundation that support actions in favour of the disadvantaged childhood all over the world), the MNE supported the early childhood Moroccan NGO ATFALE in the production of a pedagogical kit that was distributed to 120 regional trainers supposed to ensure the training of 2.000 others pre-school educators (Save the Children, 2011).

With more than 20 years of experience among the different institutions that work in the pre-school education in Morocco, the ATFALE team, composed by professors and researchers of the Faculty of Educational Science of Rabat, has written different publications that are considered as an excellent guideline for those educators that want to improve their skills and competences in the sector.

According to these researches and professors, a modern concept of pre-school education should be adopted and spread among educators. In fact, the early childhood education should pursue some specific and fundamental objectives that ATFALE team has identified in: (1) the development of the personality of the child, (2) the respect of his/her rights, (3) the strengthen of his/her cultural identity, (4) the teaching of the basic concept of citizenship, (5) getting used to the daily routine, the scholastic rhythm, to introduce the children in a funny and enjoyable way to the structure and rules of schooling, (6) foster the game, his/her movement, his/her expression, his/her creativity, (7) preserve his/her health and (8) involve the parents and the community in his/her process of education.

3. Conclusion

Pre-school education in Morocco is mainly private and it is characterised by a high level of segmentation due to the number of institutions involved as well as the practices and languages utilized. The pre-school education in Morocco encounters many challenges. Also, many projects and plans have been proposed and implemented by many actors for changing the situation of the pre-school education. The paper tries to give a brief overview of this important sector in the country; also it summarized the main initiatives created in order to achieve a better situation of the pre-school education in Morocco.

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