

## Improving Teaching Efficiency

THERE is plenty of evidence indicating that high repetition rates in the early grades of primary school may to a large extent be attributed to the low quality of the education supplied. Many countries are trying ways of overcoming the problem by improving teaching efficiency. In this respect, it has to be remembered that remedial strategies applied successfully in one country might not have the same impact in another.

While the problem is very complex, which makes it difficult to advocate generally applicable solutions there are some general aspects which may be relevant for the definition of strategies.

First, the experience of countries which have managed consistently to reduce repetition in primary education seems to indicate that it is useless to try to solve the problem by applying isolated and virtually unrelated measures, just as it is no good trying to achieve far-reaching results in the short term without a sustained effort over a period of time.

Secondly, all the evidence suggests that the problem is concentrated in the first grades of primary school, in some regions of a country more than in others and, though not exclusively, among students of specific social strata or population groups. When defining strategies, therefore, one should begin by preparing what might be described as a map of repetition, which takes account of different levels, environments and priority requirements. This map may then serve as a basis for defining strategies focused on the specific characteristics of the social groups most affected by repetition.

Thirdly, while reducing repetition rates will ensure savings in terms of average expenditure per student, it may require additional investments to make the new strategies operational. The costs involved would then have to be considered alongside existing alternatives for a better distribution of available resources.

On the basis of international experience, it is possible to identify at least five lines of strategy for dealing with the problem of grade repetition and improving the academic performance of students.

### 1. Expanding pre-schooling

There is consistent evidence which

suggests a positive co-relation between pre-school education and greater success in learning, with less grade repetition, especially if combined with food programmes. Despite this evidence, however, pre-schooling tends to be concentrated in urban areas, it is based on high-cost models and the beneficiaries are mostly children in the medium to upper social strata. If so, it is very important that strategies to expand pre-school education should give priority to the more needy and vulnerable population groups.

### 2. Improving the teaching of reading and writing and encouraging bilingual education

Changing the approach to the teaching and learning of reading and writing must be a priority policy among the strategies for reducing repetition and improving the quality of basic education, and one which must be applied differently in linguistically heterogeneous countries. On the basis of current experiments, it is safe to say that improving the method of teaching reading and writing, the mother tongue and the official language as a second language could prove very effective and could have a substantial impact even in countries with a high degree of language differentiation.

It is preferable to begin teaching reading and writing in a language which a child knows; should the child not speak the official language, it is possible to plan oral teaching by suitable methods prior to initiating the introduction to literacy.

In general terms, and without wishing to underestimate the importance of recognizing the right of different peoples to maintain and develop their own languages and cultures, it would be worth approaching strategies for the improvement of teaching in multilingual contexts, from the broader point of view of planning the use of languages in education.

### 3. Assessment systems and teaching methods

The question of which criteria to use to assess learning in primary education remains debatable. In Asia, for instance, it has been

observed that annual examinations do not appear to have produced any significant effects in terms of improved academic performance; they may even discourage students, increase drop-out and maintain high repetition rates.

The method of automatic promotion appears to produce positive effects as far as reducing drop-out is concerned, although it does not guarantee better learning or the elimination of repetition, as recent experiments have shown in some countries in Latin America. Moreover, in the absence of other measures to overcome the shortcomings of the educational system, it may serve only to defer the problem to the end of the basic cycle.

It should also be pointed out that learning assessment is often used more for selection purposes than to identify difficulties experienced by students, and is rarely a permanent, universal feature. Moreover, in view of the great linguistic and cultural diversity of many countries, it is by no means certain by which cultural standards students should be assessed, how their progress in acquiring reading and writing abilities should be measured and in which languages.

Both in Latin America (as in Bolivia and Colombia) and in Asia (Philippines, India, Nepal), some interesting experiments have been made in the area of flexible instruction, by doing away with grades and allowing pupils to progress at their own pace, encouraging the ablest with appropriate materials and providing special support for those with most problems, eliminating annual tests and encouraging instead self-assessment and self-learning.

These amount to substantial changes in the style of learning and above all in the didactic approach and the role of the teacher. Apart from the obvious requirements in terms of preparation and the development of appropriate materials, they highlight the problem of teacher training; from the point of view both of contents and of the instructors in charge. In terms of long-term strategies, careful attention should be given to the need to innovate in the area of teacher training, which in many cases appears bound to traditional and outdated approaches and which necessitates frequent retraining.

Schools offer children with few resources very poor learning conditions. Overcoming this injustice is essential, and this means making up for any shortcomings the pupil may have to face in school (for instance, in terms of physical space, equipment or textbooks). This effort of compensation should be aimed at improving school management, by providing schools with trained teachers and enough autonomy to adapt programmes to local conditions.

### Improving the measurement of repetition

Lastly, the need to improve methods of collecting and analysing statistical data should not be overlooked. It is surely not impossible to arrive at more operational and more homogenous definitions of the different types of repetition and related factors, by identifying a series of indicators to show how relevant the problem is, to check its development and to establish comparisons. Field studies are the only way of obtaining a better grasp of the difficulties, and for this the cooperation of research centres and universities is essential. With more accurate measurements, it will be possible to identify who is affected by repetition and therefore to adjust action strategies, to the target population.

### Looking towards the future

One of the most appreciable results of the UNICEF/IBE meeting was probably the new queries and concerns that were expressed regarding the problem of grade repetition rather than any attempts to provide universal answers.

While from a traditional point of view repetition may be considered to be part of the normal process of selection, the persistence of high repetition rates in fact completely contradicts the objectives of an educational system purporting to guarantee basic learning for all.

Satisfying basic learning needs implies a number of challenges and opens up new perspectives for primary school. In the end, we must assume the message left by the World Conference of Jomtien, which amounts to the conviction that all children can and should learn.

— UNESCO