

## **Perspectives in Early Childhood Education: Belize, Brazil, Mexico, El Salvador and Peru**

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“Children have a right, as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to receive education, and early childhood education (ECE) must be considered part of this right.”

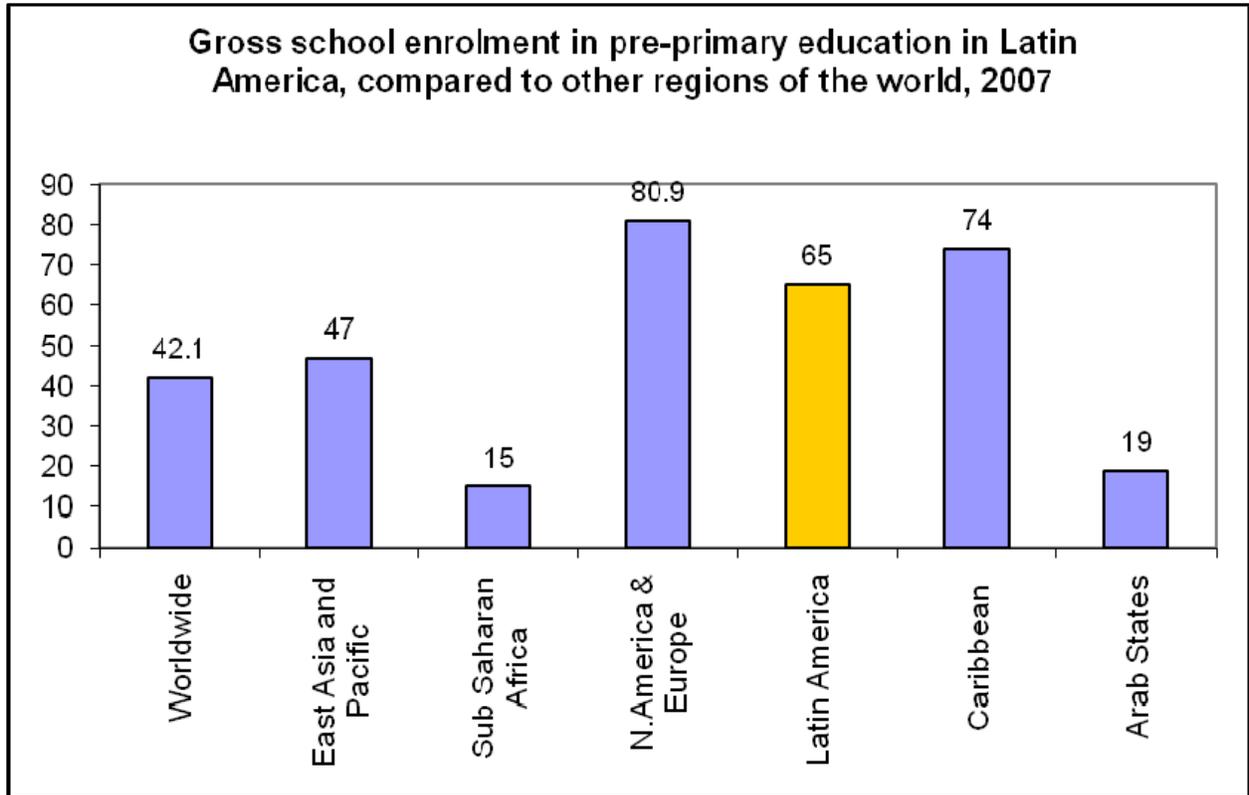
### **A Global Scenario (June 9, 2012)**

#### **Introduction**

Early childhood education (ECE) provision is becoming a growing priority. During the past twenty years, Latin America has shown a growing recognition in the provision of educational programs for young children, birth to age eight, is essential. Urban and rural populations intimated in 2009, that many countries utilizing equitable access to quality early childhood programs is often seen by policy makers as a means of achieving economic and political goals (United Nations, 2012). Unfortunately, a pre-occupation with economic and political goals may conflict with the provision of quality programming for young children. Chavez and McConnell (2000) stated, “Early childhood education in Latin America has been fragmented, and in some places nonexistent. In general, those that are able to afford it place their children in private preschool programs or hire a staff person, servant, or babysitter to provide the daily custodial care for the child”. (p. 159)

In a number of Latin American countries provisions for educating young children exist as intent to provide quality services. The continuing challenge is to finance, organize and regulate those well-meaning intentions. As the, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Starting Strong II, reported: “In many OECD countries, the level of regulation of services for children under three gives rise for concern: much of the child care sector is private and unregulated, with staff training and pedagogical programming being particularly weak.” (OECD, 2006, p. 12)

Therefore, the objective of this article is two-fold. Firstly, to describe national policy efforts which regulate the education of young children consistently. And, secondly, to reflect the status of early childhood education programming; and to examine the possibilities for the improvement of the quality and accessibility of an education for all young children. Five Latin American nations have been chosen for examination, including: Belize, Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico and Peru. The information in Table 1, offers insights to the levels of pre-primary education in the Latin American areas which shows a comparison with other regions in the world (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2007).



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

**Table 1: Pre-primary Education, Latin America, and other Regions - 2007**

## Belizean Education for Early Childhood

### *Country Profile*

The country of Belize is located on the Yucatan Peninsula, in Central America with the Caribbean Sea coastal lines running along the northeastern side. Mexico borders the northwest side of Belize with Guatemala, running along the south and west side (Cook, 2010; Hope, 2010). Belize remains a country of strong diversity including: landscapes of mountainous ranges to dense rain forests and white sandy beaches. These areas surround approximately 900 historic Mayan temple ruins. The soil in Belize contains rich nutrients for growing leafy green vegetables. Over four hundred various sub-tropical fish habitat off the coastal shorelines with more than five hundred species of birds which average more diverse fowl than any other country in the world (Hope, 2010; ChaaCreek, 2012; The World Bank – Belize, 2012).

The name of British Honduras was changed in 1973 to Belize and later gained independence from Great Britain in September, 1981 (ChaaCreek, 2012; The World Bank – Belize, 2012). The country of Belize is quite small, ranging 22,963 square kilometers and appears the size of the, State of Connecticut in the United States of America. Over one-hundred

small islands, known as, 'Cayes', set off Belize among many obscure places in the world (ChaaCreek, 2012).

For being a very young country the Belizean population is approximately 330,000 residents and has an annual growth rate of 2.21 percent. Fifty-two percent of the population lives in the urban area while others are divided into six districts; all distinctly Belizean, but each one having their own unique blend of cultures and natural environments (Cook, 2010; Hope, 2010).

The six Belizean Districts include: 'Belize City'; which also includes, 'Ambergris Caye' (Island areas), while 'Cayo' is without a seacoast but has a river system and a rainforest with Mayan archaeological sites. To the north, the district of 'Corozal' and 'Orange Walk', both of which grow sugar cane, are richly influenced through Spanish descent, while the 'Stann Creek' and 'Toledo' Districts to the south have a much larger Maya and Garifuna population with dense jungles.

All of the districts share Belizean multiculturalism including: Black African, Creole, Chinese, East Indian, European, Garifuna, Mestizo and Middle Eastern. Many other ethnic backgrounds are all part of the cultural mix that makes Belize a diverse, vibrant, colourful country (ChaaCreek, 2012).

There is "an average of 33 people per square mile which is compared to the United States at 84 people per square mile." (Hope, 2010, p. 1) More than 96 percent of the population is under sixty-four years of age with 36.8 percent, that are eighteen years of age and younger. While many diverse languages are prevalent such as: French Creole, Spanish and others, Belize is the only Central American country where English is predominately spoken (Cook, 2010). As a young country the portion of GDP spent for educational purposes range 5.7 percent which can be compared to 5.5 percent in the United States of America (Hope, 2010).

### **Education of Young Children in Belize**

Belize, like many developing countries in the post-colonial context, has developed an educational system based upon a structured and traditional style of pedagogy (State Report, 2003). The Belizean educational system is compulsory and is for youth between the ages of 5 to 15 years. Preschool education is for those students who are three and four years of age. At the age of five, a student may enter primary school as a member of the Infant I class. The second year of primary school is known as Infant II. The third year of primary school for those children who turn seven years of age is known as, Standard I. The next several years of school range from Standard II through Standard V. Upon the completion of Standard VI, a student may likely be eligible to attend high school.

The first year of high school is referred to as, Form I. The succeeding years of high school, are designated as Forms II through IV. Because the Belizean educational system is compulsory, many students turning 14 and 15 years of age do not attend Forms III and IV. Those

students who can afford college or university may attend three or four years depending on the type of study. Some students begin study at age 16, which also depends on the success of the lower level achievements (G. Price & S. Cruz, personal communication, April 16, 2007).

Nevertheless, the experiences of attending school in Belize continue to remain problematic, which is primarily due to frequent family migrations and numerous expenses associated with having an education (Cook, 2010). For most Belizean families the opportunity to attend primary school and high school is unaffordable due to the high cost of administration fees, textbooks, uniforms, classroom materials and excursions (Cook, 2010; State Report, 2010). In addition, Table 2, offers information as to the, Gross and Net rates of Preschool Education Enrollment in several Central American countries including, Belize.

Table 3: Gross and net rates of preschool education enrollment	Ages			Gross enrollment rate		Net enrollment rate		Girl/boy ratio-GER	
				1990	2003	2004-6	1998	2003	
<b>Central America</b>				30.64		42.62			
Belize	3-4	23.2	28.8	-----	-----	27.8	-----	1.03	1.07
Costa Rica	4-5	61.7	60.9	-----	61.4	43.3	-----	1.02	1.02
El Salvador	4-6	21.0'	48.6	-----	-----	43.6	-----	1.05	1.06
Guatemala	5-6	26.0'	55.2	56.8*	-----	41.1	46.0*	0.99	1.01
Honduras	4-6	17.1''	21.4	-----	-----	21.4	-----	....	1.05
Nicaragua	3-6	12.1	27.7	32.5*	-----	27.7	32.5*	1.02	1.03
Panama	4-5	53.4	55.8	-----	-----	52.0	-----	0.96	1.01
Reference figures for Latin America	43.6		60.9	-----	-----	50.6	-----	1.02	1.02

Source: Cefas Asensio, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006*, UNESCO, with data from 1990, 1998 and 2003, <http://gmr.uis.unesco.org/>. 1991, data taken from: <http://www.campus-oei.org/observatorio>. Statistical reports from El Salvador and Guatemala, with reference to the UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, 1999. Statistics for 1990-1999. Secretaría de Educación/UNESCO, December 1999. 2005 data. Guatemalan Ministry of Education and Nicaraguan Ministry of Education, Culture

*Literacy Rate and Child Labor*

**Table 2: Central America, Gross, Net rates of Preschool Education Enrollment, 1990-2006**

The overall literacy rate of Belize is approximately 76 percent which varies in relation to the geographic locale (State Report, 2010). One of the major factors toward lower literacy rates may be contributed to school attendance. However, school attendance rates vary within lower socio-economic conditions of given locals. The subsistence economic conditions throughout each of the six districts of Belize often make it impossible for children to attend school. Students not only lack the funds for school expenses, but they are required to work to support the family (Cook, 2010).

The 'Child Activity Survey' revealed, "...77.3 percent of children living in Belize from

the ages of 5 to 17 are working.” (CAS, 2001, p. 28). The findings of the cited survey have indicated that approximately 18 percent of school-age children have not attended a school and are essentially child labourers. Preschool children are affected by the impoverishment of many Belizeans. Attendance to preschools has continued to remain problematic. Preschool attendance ranges from 60.4 percent in the urban areas of Belize City and ranges a low 2.7 percent in the rural southern district of, Toledo (UNICEF, 2006). The national average for preschool attendance is approximately 27.3 percent (State Report, 2010).

The seriousness of child labor in Belize is challenging and extends beyond its deleterious impact on school attendance rates. The International Child Advocacy Organisation (ICAO) warns that many Belizean children are exposed to toxic pesticides and working long days (State Report, 2003). In addition, most Belizean children who work are at risk of abuse and mistreatment by adults (IPS, 2006). Legislation and regulation is required to address the plight of primary school children who engage in commercial activities, domestic work, and agricultural labor during school hours instead of attending public school programs (Cook, 2010; State Report, 2010).

### *Continuous Improvements in Education*

Like other Latin American countries, Belize continues to make positive strides toward the improvement of early childhood education and the overall conditions for the welfare of children and their families. In 1994, Belize was recognized, ‘International Year of the Family’. That recognition resulted in an on-going effort to improve the social and economic conditions in the country. Representatives from Belize attended the, ‘United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children’ in May, 2002. In so doing, Belize began a thrust toward leading a new support for the Global Plan of Action known as: A World Fit for Children (NCFC, 2002).

Consequently, UNICEF established an intervention program for young children in Belize. The program known as, ‘The Enhancing Holistic Child Development Program’, focuses on children from zero to six years of age. This program includes the formation of policy and the passage of legislation to foster the development of curricula for early childhood education (Cook, 2010). It collaterally provides parent education and promotes male involvement in childcare through the educational process. Belize continues to improve and support programs intended and designed to improve early childhood education, as on-going efforts are set in place to establish new preschools in all six Belizean districts through-out the country (Cook, 2010; Ministry of Education-Belize, 2010).

## **Early Childhood Education in Brazil**

### *Country Profile*

Brazil is geographically the largest country in South America and the eighth largest country in the world. With many other South American Spanish speaking countries; Brazil is the only

Portuguese speaking nation in the Americas. As of July 2012, approximately 205,716,890 peoples live in Brazil (CIA-Brazil, 2012). Although Brazil is the most populous country in South America, “The population growth has slowed down as the growth rate has projected for 2002-15 to be approximately 1.1 percent.” (Policy Review Report-Brazil, 2012, p.12). About 21.4 percent of the people in Brazil live at the poverty line.

Future prospects for socio-economic conditions continue to improve as, “Poverty (PPP US\$ 2 per day) has fallen markedly, from 21 percent of the population in 2003 to 11 percent in 2009. Extreme poverty (PPP US\$ 1.25 per day) also dropped dramatically, from 10 percent in 2004 to 2.2 percent in 2009.” (The World Bank, 2012) The country’s investment in education is shown in the portion of GDP spent for educational purposes at 5 percent. Along with the improvement of economic conditions in Brazil, there are also continual changes in the provision of early childhood education.

#### *The Status of Education for Young Children since 1996*

A pivotal year in Brazil, 1996 was recognized and identified for the thrust of early childhood education. The Brazilian government instituted The 1996 National Education Guidelines and Framework Law of Brazil, which established the boundaries for early childhood education. The law defined certain settings for each early childhood age group. Within those years, child care centers were stipulated only for children 0 to 3+ years of age. Children 4+ to 6+ of age were considered preschool. The Brazilian laws identified the care and education of young children from the ages of 0 to 6+ as belonging to basic education and that early childhood education services were part of the total educational system. The attendance in the basic educational system was not considered mandatory (National Education Guidelines-Brazil, 2012; The World Bank-Brazil, 2012).

#### *Implementation and Access*

In Brazil, the municipalities are responsible for the services of early childhood education and learning. That includes the administration to provide funding resources and all access to childcare centers and preschools. Even though the municipalities of Brazil provide the facilities and conduct the administrative duties for early childhood education, it is the individual states that provide teacher training. As the attendance before age six is not compulsory, most teacher training programs do not address the development or education of children four and five years of age. More importantly, the teacher programs do not address the educational needs of children three years of age and younger (The World Bank – Brazil, 2012).

The Fundo de Desenvolvimento do Ensino Fundamental e de Valorização do Magistério; Fund for the Development of Elementary Education and Teacher Development (FUNDEF),

requires the states and municipalities in Brazil to allocate 25 percent of the tax revenue for education. Included in the laws that set-up the funding is a provision that each state and municipality spend at least 60 percent of the revenue on elementary education. Belfield (2007), a financial source commented, “However, because the earmarked funding is to be applied to all education, and primary and secondary education is mandatory, there is no specific commitment for ECCE.” (p. 5)

### *Challenges and Recommendations*

The government of Brazil made a policy statement concerning early childhood education without making adequate provisions for the funding of the programs for young children. It is to the government’s credit that early childhood education is recognized as a discipline that is an integral component of education. The municipalities assigned the responsibility for the education of their youngest citizens and unfortunately were faced with the challenge of having no mandate to establish a functional system for early childhood education with defined funding. Consequently, much of what has been prescribed has not been put into practice.

A Brazilian society has failed to recognize the importance of educating children three years of age and younger. The International Early Childhood Education Task Force (IECETF) has stated, “Although by law, ECE falls under the education sector, the division of ECE provision between pre-school and childcare has meant that ‘crèches’ often function as day-care rather than early childhood education centres and moreover are poorly organized (too few ‘crèches’ for the number of children, 0-3 years) and many are not integrated in the education sector and recognized as education institutions.” (IECETF, 2010, p. 33) However, the family and community-programs in Brazil continue to target the disadvantaged regions and lower socio-economic communities in the urban areas which have essentially attempted to increase the enrollment of children in the Early Childhood Educational services, by engaging parents into the programs (IECETF, 2010).

Currently, teacher training in Brazil does not include programs for pre-service training of teaching very young children. It is recommended, the training of early childhood teachers include a thorough knowledge base of child development and the curricula be appropriate to children zero through three years of age. Teacher training specifically designed for the teaching of children three years of age and younger is considered to be essential. An administrative apparatus for the regularization, certification and monitoring of early childhood education and teacher training in Brazil will be expanded (IECETF, 2010). Additionally, statistics from educational perspectives from Brazil have been added as follows:

**Table 3: Educational Statistics in Brazil, 2005–2010**

Youth (15-24 years) literacy rate (%), 2005-2010*, male	97
Youth (15-24 years) literacy rate (%), 2005-2010*, female	99
Number per 100 population, 2010, mobile phones	104
Number per 100 population, 2010, Internet users	41
Pre-primary school participation, Gross enrolment ratio (%), 2007-2010*, male	65
Pre-primary school participation, Gross enrolment ratio (%), 2007-2010*, female	65
Primary school participation, Gross enrolment ratio (%), 2007-2010*, male	132
Primary school participation, Gross enrolment ratio (%), 2007-2010*, female	123
Primary school participation, Net enrolment ratio (%), 2007-2010*, male	96
Primary school participation, Net enrolment ratio (%), 2007-2010*, female	94
Primary school participation, Net attendance ratio (%), 2005-2010*, male	95
Primary school participation, Net attendance ratio (%), 2005-2010*, female	95
Primary school participation, Survival rate to last primary grade (%), 2006-2009, Admin. data	
Primary school participation, Survival rate to last primary grade (%), 2005-2010, Survey data	88
Secondary school participation, Net enrolment ratio (%), 2007-2010*, male	78
Secondary school participation, Net enrolment ratio (%), 2007-2010*, female	85
Secondary school participation, Net attendance ratio (%), 2005-2010*, male	74
Secondary school participation, Net attendance ratio (%), 2005-2010*, female	80

**Source:** *Adult literacy* - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), including the Education for All 2000 Assessment. *Phone and Internet use* - International Telecommunications Union, Yearbook of Statistics 1992-2001. *Primary and secondary school enrolment* - UNESCO, including the Education for All 2000 Assessment. *Net primary school attendance* - Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). *Reaching grade five* - Admin data: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, including the Education for All 2000 Assessment. Survey data: DHS and MICS.

## **Early Years in El Salvador**

### *Country Profile*

The country of El Salvador is considered the smallest country in Central America. “El Salvador is bordered by Honduras to the north and east and, by Guatemala to the west. It has a 307 kilometers coastal line on the Pacific and is the only country in the region not to have a Caribbean shore.” (Foreign and Commonwealth, 2012)

The population of El Salvador is approximately 6.07 million with 90 percent of the Salvadorians of the Mestizo (Spanish and Indian) heritage. As the smallest country in the Continental America, about the size of Massachusetts in the United States of America, El Salvador is referred to as Pulgarcito de America, the ‘Tom Thumb of the Americas’. It has a volatile history of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in the nation’s capital city, San Salvador, which also suffered great damage in 1986. There are over 20 volcanoes, two of which are active volcanoes, 300 rivers and 13.9 percent of the land is covered by forests. El Salvador survived a devastating Civil War from 1980-1992 where approximately 75,000 people perished during the perils of this national conflict (Foreign et. al, 2012).

At present, El Salvador enjoys a democratic republic governed by a President who is elected through national elections. The country allocates 3.6 percent of the national GDP for education purposes. The history of early childhood education in El Salvador is as impressive. The first nursery school comprised of a private enterprise in 1886. The curriculum for the nursery school was based on the teachings of the originator of kindergarten, a German educator, Fredrich Froebel. Many years later, in 1941, the curriculum was adopted by the El Salvadorian educational system as part of the, Organic Law on Public Education (Foreign et. al, 2012).

### *History of Early Childhood Education*

Although nursery schools were recognized in 1941, it was not until the government of El Salvador accepted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which allowed the comprehensive development of children to be adopted as a national policy. Since the early 1990s, the El Salvadoran government implemented a variety of childhood-related initiatives (CRC, 2012).

The Ministry of Education of El Salvador in 1991, initiated the ‘Community-Managed Schools Program’ (EDUCO), (Educacion con Participacion de la Comunidad) with support from The World Bank, parents, teacher associations, and local NGOs. The EDUCO program, which envisages a self-managed private form of education, was strictly intended to address problematic situations in rural areas (EDUCO, 2012; The World Bank – El Salvador, 2012).

In each of the EDUCO (2012), schools there were self-sufficient management by an elected Community Education Association, drawn from the parents of students. In these schools,

the associations were contracted by the Ministry of Education to deliver given curriculum to an agreed number of students, and were also responsible for contracting and dismissing teachers, as well as equipping and maintaining the schools (Ministry of Education-El Salvador, 2012). “Two major policies for early childhood have been approved in El Salvador. One is the comprehensive childhood care envisioned by the, ‘National Policy for the Comprehensive Development of Children and Adolescents’ (Política Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y Adolescencia (PNDINA). The other is the universalization of nursery education, with priority for 6-year-olds, mandated by the ‘National Education Plan 2021’.” (Plan Nacional de Educación, 2021, p. 45)

In relation to early childhood education, the National Education Plan 2021 recognizes “Children’s learning experiences from birth to six are crucial for improving their prospects of success in basic education.” (Plan Nacional de Educación 2021, p. 20) It stresses children’s need for an all-round support system and commits the Ministry of Education to expanding the formal education supply, with the support of communities. Similarly, it states, “The essential goal of education is the all-round development of Salvadoran children—physical, emotional, social, moral and spiritual.” (Plan Nacional de Educación 2021, p. 13)

An ambitious policy for the improvement of early childhood education in El Salvador is the implementation of these policies which have been hampered by a complex multi-level bureaucratic system and unpredictable budgetary allocations. Thus, El Salvador’s economic policy constrains social spending. It suggests that educational expenditures at 3.6 percent of the GDP are not predicted to increase. If that trend continues, then the policies relating to the public access to education under six years of age will be adversely affected (Foreign et. al, 2012).

### *Realities of Public Education*

The educational system of El Salvador is divided into preschool, primary, secondary and higher education. The terms, preschool and kindergarten, are used interchangeably. Preschool education is for children who are between two through six years of age. Refer to table 2 which shows Gross and Net rates of Preschool Education Enrollment in El Salvador from 1990 through 2006.

At age seven, the Primary grades begin compulsory education which lasts until grade nine. The policy states that education is tuition-free through high school. Even though tuition may not be charged to students, there remain school expenses including: textbooks, school uniforms and other school-related supplies. After six years of basic education, elementary and middle school, students have the option of attending either a two or a three year high school. The two-year high school program prepares students to attend a university, whereas the three-year program prepares the students for a vocational career (The World Bank – El Salvador, 2012).

The public educational system in El Salvador is severely lacking in educational-related resources. There are too few schools and teachers available in the rural areas of the country. Moreover, it is common for class sizes in the public schools to reach more than forty students per one classroom teacher. Those families who can afford an education often choose the option of private education for their children. Families from a lower socio-economic status are relegated to send their children to public schools. On "...average, children complete 5.5 grade levels. Many students in rural areas are denied nine years of compulsory education due to a lack of schools. Often students are withdrawn from school to work to increase their family's income." (EIIIE, 2012, p. 1)

EL Salvador's Community-Managed Schools Program (EDUCO, 2012) has been very successful in expanding educational opportunities for the poor in rural areas. Decentralization has also been instrumental in helping families and communities become more involved in the education of their children (EDUCO, 2012; The World Bank – El Salvador, 2012).

### *Reflections and Recommendations*

After undergoing a twelve year-civil war that left thousands of children abandoned, homeless and orphaned, El Salvador began reorganizing the educational system. Several recommendations ensure those policies that currently exist and for those policies proposed in the future will be put into practices which include the following:

- Most children living in the rural areas of the country do not receive the same quality of basic education services that children in urban areas receive. Programs and policies which address this inequity are needed.
- More early childhood teachers and school directors/principals require more pre-service and in-service educational training.
- Providing educational opportunities for young children's family members and ways to involve them in the education and care of their children at school.
- The Ministries of Health and Education in El Salvador need to develop policies which insure more effective decentralized monetary investment in the educational services to young children and their families.
- Positive linkages to the private sector need to be encouraged and enhanced. The private sector includes private schools and companies located in El Salvador and international grants, companies and programs which expand opportunities for young Salvadorian children (EDUCO, 2012; World Bank – El Salvador, 2012).

Several additional innovative programs ensure and provide that children in El Salvador receive a successful basic education. A few of these programs are described below:

- USAID/El Salvador has been improving the access to and quality of basic education to children in poor rural areas. USAID/El Salvador is in its third

decade improving the quality of early childhood and preschool education. This project is the largest bilateral donor supporting education in the country.

- **EDIFAM:** Early Childhood Family Education Activity was implemented by the Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (Institute Salvadorian for Integrated Development of Children and Youth, ISDINA), including; Ministries of Education and Health, UNICEF, American Institutes for Research, Education Development Center, Save the Children, and Sesame Street Workshop. This activity concentrated on children younger than six years of age. It targeted programs to help twenty percent of rural children under the age of six which previously did not participate in formal or non-formal preschool education. There is a relationship between a lack of access to quality early childhood care, education and learning problems including dropout and repetition in primary school. EDIFAM benefits young children in ways which include; training of 450 preschool and 50 pedagogical advisers in early childhood theory and classroom methods. As a result of this training, 13,000 children benefit from teachers and advisers' improving preschool teaching practices.
- **EXCELL:** Excellence in Classroom at the Local Level (Social Sector Reform, Phase 2) was implemented by the American Institutes for Research and Academy for Educational Development with the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation. This project emphasized the improvements of language and math instruction, through focusing on the pedagogical leadership of school principals (EDUCO, 2012; UNICEF, 2012). "The underlying assumption was that better-prepared principals would exercise improved instructional leadership vis-à-vis teachers, parents, and children—thus leading to better implementation of educational policies and improved classroom quality." (ISDINA, 2012, p.12)

## **Provisions for Early Childhood Education in Mexico**

### *Country Profile*

The country of Mexico is located in North America and is bordered by the United States to the north, Belize and Guatemala to the south; Gulf of Mexico to the east and Pacific Ocean to the west. The area of the country is 1,972,550 square kilometers (761,601 square miles), or nearly three times the size of the, State of Texas in the United States of America (Encyclopedia of the Nations, 2012).

A country of varied terrain, Mexico's landscape reaches mountainous areas, deserts, plateaus and low ocean-side plains. It was governed by Spain until independence was gained in 1821. Unfortunately, with the independence of Mexico's political distresses were just beginning and sporadically have continued to the present. Since, 2007, along with political upheavals,

Mexico's powerful drug-trafficking organizations have engaged in feuding which have resulted in tens of thousands of drug-related homicides (Geographia, 2012).

There are approximately 101 million people living in Mexico, which include: 12.4 million children under the age of six and 1.5 million children coming from indigenous language groups with 8.6 million ranging three through six. The literacy rate of the country can be defined as, those who are 15 years of age and older and who are also able to read and write at 86.1 percent. Since 2000, Mexico developed policies to improve the quality, availability and quantity of services for the education of young children. The investment in education is considered 4.8 percent of the national GDP (Geographia, 2012; The World Bank - Mexico, 2012).

### *Status of and Policies for Early Childhood Education*

The diversity of Mexico is comprised of 32 states and 2,443 municipalities incorporating various local governments. There is more than one system in Mexico for the organization of early childhood education. "At present there are several sub-systems operating, with relatively loose coordination, under the auspices of different ministries, notably, Education (SEP) and Social Development (SEDESOL); under different social security institutes (IMSS and ISSSTE); and under other national auspices, e.g. the National System for Integral Family Development (DIF), the National Council for Educational Promotion (CONAFE), as well as private organizations." (OECD), 2006, p. 378)

Children from 0-3 years of age have limited access to education. Only three percent of children in the youngest age group attend preschool. The existing preschool programs in Mexico are designated for children 3-6 years of age. Consistently, there are three types of preschools; the general preschool program, the indigenous preschool program administered by a special division and, the community preschools. Eighty-eight percent of preschool-aged children in rural and urban areas attend school. Nevertheless, there are more preschools in urban areas; fewer educational opportunities for young indigenous children as well as, for those who live in rural areas. Most of the schools are open for three or four hours per day Monday through Friday. In the urban areas, there are 'mixed preschools' (jardines mixtos). These programs combine a regular preschool with an additional day-long care program to create a 'mixed preschool' program (OECD, 2006; The World Bank – Mexico, 2012).

### *Quality and Availability of Programs and Opportunities for Young Children*

With approximately 80 percent of the administration for early childhood education settings in Mexico is decentralized within the states. Compulsory primary schools traditionally begin at the age of six however, the policy changed in November 2002 with introducing, The Law of Obligatory Pre-schooling November 2002, endorsed in 2009, that all parents must enroll their children in preschool at the age of three (OECD, 2006).

Mexico by far is one of the few countries in the world that mandates education for three year old children. Even though a mandate is in order, the reality is quite different. The attendance in each of the thirty-two states varies greatly from one to another. For example, “Although over 81 percent of the children are enrolled at five years, only slightly over half the children (55 percent) of the total three through six-year-old population is currently enrolled. Enrollment ratios are essentially the same for girls and boys.” (OECD 2006, p. 381)

### *Summary and Recommendations*

In Mexico, there is a gap in early childhood education that exists between practice and policy, the administrations of early childhood programs from state to state, and the differences in quality and funding of schools for young children. The following are recommendations to increase the availability and value of programs for the youngest of children:

- Expand the quality of instruction for young Mexican children.
- Provide pre-service-in-service training for Mexican teachers of young children.
- Serve indigenous children and those who live in poor rural areas of Mexico.
- Develop more efficient, decentralized administration and funding of early childhood education (OECD, 2006, p. 379).

Over time, Mexico has improved access to early childhood education which has been recognized for its policy relating to three year-old children. Programs for young children have grown approximately 2 percent per capita year as there began a significant increase in school enrollments from 1975 to 1983. In the future, the challenge continues to provide programs of uniform quality and accessibility for all of the children in Mexico (OECD, 2006; The World Bank - Mexico, 2012).

## **Birth - Grade 6 Basic Education in Peru**

### *Country Profile*

The Republic of Peru is the third largest country in South America and the 19th in the world. Peru is 496,222 square miles and is smaller than the State of Alaska. It is located in the central part of South America and is bordered by Ecuador and Colombia to the north, Brazil and Bolivia to the east, Chile to the south and has a 1,400-mile desert coastal line along the Pacific Ocean to the west (The World Bank – Peru, 2012).

In Peru, the western coastal plains are separated from the eastern lowland jungle of the Amazon Basin by the Andes Mountains. Peru shares Lake Titicaca, the world's highest navigable lake, with Bolivia and is known for the 200-mile width of a corridor along the 1,544-mile Pacific border. The Andes Mountains run through the length of the country with 40 mountains higher

than 19,000 feet. Historically, Peru contains the most famous of the ‘Inca Empire’s’ ruins, the hidden city of ‘Machu Picchu’, which is a popular tourist destination in the Andes Mountains (The World Bank – Peru, 2012).

The population of Peru ranges from approximately 29,180,900 people which have a large indigenous population that consist primarily of ‘Quechuan and Aymara’ cultures. These two ethnic groups live from the highlands to the coastal lines, with tribes in the remote depths of the Peruvian Amazon Rainforest. Close to 70 percent of the people also live in urban areas. The literacy rate defined for people age 15 and older who can read and write is at approximately 93 percent for men and 82.1 percent for women. In Peru, 2.7 percent of the national GDP is spent for educational programs and services (The World Bank –Peru, 2012).

### *Programs on Behalf of Young Children*

In 1972, the Peruvian Ministry of Education introduced national education reforms which expanded the concept of early childhood education to include children below the age of five. The Ministry of Education established preschools, known as initial education programs and parental programs. The Ministry of Education encouraged local governments to establish community-based childcare centers (Chavez, al et. 2000, p.159). Prior to this date, initial education was called preschool (The World Bank – Peru, 2012).

Since 1970, Peru has had two types of community-based, government funded programs. The first, Programas no Escolarizados de Educación Inicial (PRONOEI), is a successful non-school programs for early education. A second program, (*Centros de Educación Inicial*, early education centres, CEIs), is considered professionally and resourcefully staffed. Children who are in need, especially those living in rural areas, benefit mostly from PRONOEIs. Those children living in urban settings and more advantaged areas benefit the most from CEIs (The World Bank-Peru, 2012; UNICEF-Peru, 2012).

In 1993 the Ministry of Education and UNICEF developed ‘Wawa Wasi’, the national home day care centers. These programs operate in conjunction with the National Food Aid Program, the National Family Welfare Institute, churches and several other organizations. The ‘Wawa Wasi’ serves the poorest of Peruvian areas and is community-based. In each location there is a care-giver trained in basic nutrition and child-care and is designated as the ‘Wawa Wasi’ community’s caregiver. For a small fee any woman who is working and has children younger than three years of age may leave her child for daily child care with the community’s caregiver. The services of the ‘Wawa Wasi’ provide a parent’s association and parenting education as part of this program (The World Bank-Peru, 2012; UNICEF-Peru, 2012).

The programs of ‘PRONOEI, CEI and Wawa Wasi’ have been very effective in providing educational services to Peruvian children and their families. Peru has made substantial attempts to provide education for young children, support and training for their families.

Consequently, there is still a constant need to provide access for quality services and education for the young children in Peru (The World Bank-Peru, 2012; UNICEF-Peru, 2012).

### *Equity and Equality of Early Childhood Education*

The issues of equity and equality of Peru cannot be overlooked primarily because the education of children in rural and urban settings are substantially different. As is true in other Latin countries, educational services for young children in Peru are mostly prevalent in urban communities. Ninety-two percent of children three years of age and older living in urban areas have attended preschool whereas seventy-eight percent of rural children three years of age and older have gone to preschool. “In urban communities, 15.9 percent of the ‘most-poor’ children did not access pre-school, compared to 2.4 percent of the ‘least poor’. In rural communities, 34.9 per cent of the ‘most-poor’ children did not access pre-school, compared to 6.3 percent of the, ‘least- poor’.” (Woodhead, 2009, p. 10) These statistics confirm that rates of attendance in pre-school are linked to poverty levels for both urban and rural children.

A current Peruvian national project helps those children who are three to five years of age living in rural areas. This project began in 2011 in the rural areas of Ayacucho, Huancavelica and Huánuco, Peru. Those three areas were chosen due to poverty levels and high rates of grade repetition among children who attend school. Peru was given a \$25 million loan, from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). This loan was based upon the development of schools, improving the teaching methods including bilingual and multicultural awareness. In addition, the loan was given to help schools involve families in the educational lives of children. The program will also include equipping, rehabilitating and replacing one hundred and ninety early childhood centers while providing maintenance plans for an additional two hundred and ninety-six centers in three high-need rural areas. The success of this project has been extremely encouraging. However, there remains an overwhelming need to address the educational needs of young children living in Peru (The World Fact Book, 2008).

### *Assessing the Present and Looking Forward to the Future*

Quality education which is readily available for young children is needed in Peru. More than 11 percent of Peruvian families earn below \$1.00 per day and 37 percent of women work ten or more hours a day away from home. At present, only a quarter of Peru’s four year-old children and only three of every two hundred children under the age of three attend educational programs (The World Fact book, 2008).

Susan Goldmark (2012), regional director for Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, UNICEF commented, “All Peruvian children, regardless of where they were born, the educational level of their parents, the color of their skin or the language their family speaks,

should have the same opportunities of access to basic healthcare, safe water, sanitation, nutrition and a quality basic education.” (UNICEF, 2012, p. 1)

Presently, an additional Peruvian plan, The National Plan of Action for Childhood 2002 – 2010, which was developed by The Ministry for Women's Affairs and Human Development, (Promudeh Ministerio de Promocion de la Mujer y del Desarrollo Humano, PROMUDEH). The aim of this plan is to improve human rights of Peruvian children and adolescents. The implementation of this plan has been designated through various states with the first strategic objective to ensure a healthy life for boys and girls from birth to age five. The expected outcomes are as follows:

- creation of conditions for healthy and safe motherhood and birth;
- universal rights of all boys and girls to a name and identity;
- supplementary nourishment for all children under the age of two;
- special needs screenings, detected, accommodated and rehabilitated;
- conditions to secure the right to life of all boys and girls;
- improvement of nutritional status;
- integrated development of children from an early age (The World Fact Book-Peru, 2010).

The aims of this project are ambitious and commendable but the results have not been published. Looking forward to the future, there is a necessity to evaluate and address the educational needs of the young children of Peru. Following are a few suggestions for improving the status, equality and quality of programs for young children in Peru:

- Develop a framework for the evaluation, monitoring and comparison of the programs and policies.
- Establish a national-level system for assessing children’s development and school readiness.
- Provide informal educational opportunities for families of children less than six years of age.
- Encourage training of early childhood teachers and teacher assistants.
- Recognize the bilingual need for teachers to communicate orally and in writing both in Spanish and in their student’s first language.
- Enhance private, secular, church-sponsored and international programs which invest in the improvement of education for Peruvian children (The World Fact Book-Peru, 2010).

Compared with 18 other countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, utilized the Human Opportunities Index (HOI); a measurement tool introduced in 2009, in a World Bank Study for Latin America and the Caribbean (World Bank Study, 2009).

The HOI also measures inequality of opportunities in access to a specific group of goods and services—which are referred to as ‘basic opportunities’—and their relationship with a set of ‘circumstances’ for a particular population segment: children and young people under the age of 18. This study included variables such as: gender, location (urban and rural), altitude of district of residence, education and income of the household head, family structure (number of siblings and number of parents present) and ethnic groups. Peru ranked sixth in completing the primary school on time. (World Book Study, et. al, 2009).

Additional key HOI findings for Peru include:

- The index for completing primary school on time, 50 (index ranges from 0 to 100), which continues to be low given the insufficient coverage as well as, the unequal distribution of opportunities.
- Successful in the expansion of coverage with pre-school education.
- With respect to infrastructure, HOI performance was uneven. The HOI for cellular telephones grew significantly, from 8 to 52 between 2004 and 2009, although marked disparities persist.
- The HOI for access to electricity rose from 52 to 67 whereas that of sanitation increased from 44 to 55, in both cases due to improved coverage and more equitable distribution.
- In the case of safe water, improvements were limited.

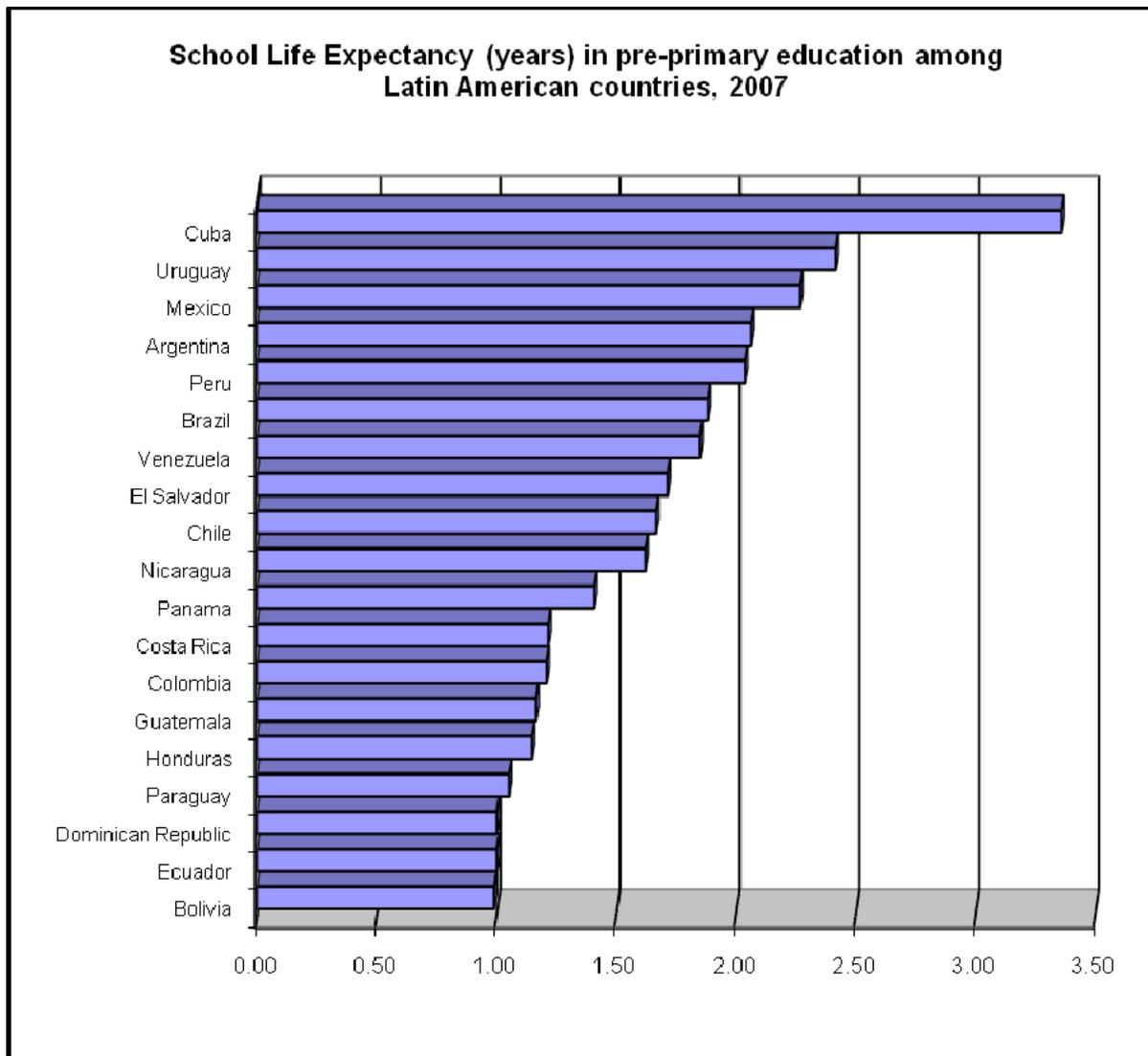
Over the past few years educational programs for young Peruvian children and their families have benefited from an infusion of funds from international sources. The availability of educational opportunities for young children in Peru has been widely discussed, however, the equality of educational services to the urban community as compared to the rural and poor still remains inconsistent (The World Fact Book-Peru, 2012; UNICEF, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

As the foregoing review of the available literature demonstrates national administrators in the Latin American countries chosen for this review have stated their intent to provide quality early childhood education to the youngest of their citizens. With that endeavor they have been supported by an array of private, public and international organizations and groups. Despite this intent, the literature shows there is a persistent disparity in the quantity and quality of educational services to young children. The disparity is primarily a function of affluence and geography. The more affluent the family, the more likely it is they will receive a quality program for children before the age of 6. There will also be more opportunity for parents to participate and share in the education of their child’s education. The less affluent and those living in poverty and/or rural areas, have little or no access to quality early childhood programs and education.

Despite the differences in the percentage of the GDP in Belize, Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico and Peru, all are committed to providing quality education and they share a heritage of similar, unresolved challenges. Those challenges include the absence of accessible high quality early childhood programs which result from a shortage of funding, materials and support for early childhood teacher training. These challenges also include the absence of cooperation from families who choose to have their young children work to help support the family instead of attending school. Although these countries share many of the same challenges, it is encouraging that so many diverse countries express intent to improve the educational experiences for their young children. In addition, table 4 illustrates the school life expectancy in Latin American countries.

**Table 4: Latin American Countries - School Life Expectancy - 2007**



Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics

## Implications for Public Policy

In terms of public policy, the educational efforts reviewed in this paper have in common what tends to be a universal struggle in the provision of early childhood education. That struggle is a lack of funding and the existence of a functional infrastructure for the delivery of educational services for young children. Each of the reviewed countries in this paper have repeatedly expressed their intention to provide quality early childhood education services. That intention is evident in the legislation and programs they have established to date. The analysis reveals that even the minimally funded programs in some of the nations examined lack administrative integrity. It is often necessary for a period of time to pass during which the process of trial and error results in the recognition of deficiencies.

To fulfill the established intents of the public policies in each of the previously listed Central American and South American countries, it will be necessary to build cadres of well-educated and capable administrators, caregivers and teachers. Those administrators should be given appropriate funding and the authority to fulfill the goals of the stated legislation and policies. Simultaneously it will be necessary for each country to establish internal mechanisms for long-term best interest of education for all young children.

Those mechanisms need to be financially secure and politically independent. The primary considerations for public policy are accessibility, infrastructure stability, well trained administrators and teachers and include organizational sustainability. Simple expressions of these intentions are necessary. However; they do not in themselves build a system that will deliver a quality education for all young children.

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