

School Settings

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Abstract: The nature of primary education and the availability of an inclusive basic education worldwide are introduced and some key aspects of contemporary primary school settings outlined. These include the organisation of compulsory education at national and school level, school enrolment, class size and the grouping of students. The cultural background of student populations and the linguistic diversity arising from migration are also considered as are curriculum and learning approaches, the school year and the school day. Topics relating to the physical amenities available, the impact of digital technology on school settings and virtual schools are also introduced.

Keywords: primary education, compulsory schooling, school settings, inclusive education, migration, linguistic diversity, curriculum, school structure, digital technology, virtual schools

Introduction

At one level, a school setting can be thought of as a physical or a virtual space organized so that students can be taught and learning can take place. However, in addition to these basic qualities, the nature of the setting is impacted upon by a variety of factors including those that are politically, culturally, socially, economically and organizationally derived. In most instances schools are set up formally as institutions in relation to the needs of a given society and the overall curriculum in terms of what is taught and the way it is taught will further impact upon the nature of the school setting and what students experience. Teachers and other personnel along with students and the backgrounds from which they are drawn also form a key contribution to the nature of the school setting as does the wider physical and cultural environment within which the school is situated. In addition to the resources and other amenities available, further aspects of the school setting include organizational factors such as the duration and structure of the school day, break times, and how activities are organized over longer periods of time such as the school year. The nature of the school setting is thus open to wide variation both within as well as between countries and, rather than attempting to characterize schools comprehensively in terms of country or geographic region, the focus is on some key variables related to primary schooling with any references to specific locations only intended as indication. The nature of the school setting is thus open to wide variation both within as well as between countries and, rather than attempting to characterize schools comprehensively in terms of country or geographic region, the focus is

on some key variables related to primary schooling with any references to specific locations serving only to indicate possible illustrations. The ways in which the nature of school settings can impact upon pupils in such terms as behavior and achievement is a subject of extensive debate beyond the scope of this chapter and further readings on issues relating to some of the variables that have been identified are listed at the end.

Primary education

Within the age-span over which young people are taught the current focus is on the primary school setting. Since different countries use their own terminology in relation to the way students are grouped in schools, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) maintains a system of internationally agreed definitions (UNESCO, 2012). This International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is based on the assumption that educational experience can be ordered into categories in terms of progression of complexity of educational content (UNESCO, 2012). Within this classification “primary education” refers to programmes that are “typically designed to provide students with fundamental skills in reading, writing and mathematics (i.e. literacy and numeracy) and establish a solid foundation for learning and understanding core areas of knowledge, personal and social development” (UNESCO, 2012: 30). Other terms for such programmes include “elementary education” and “basic education” and these follow an “early childhood education” level that aims to support early development in preparation for school and society. Levels beyond primary education include lower and upper secondary education where the curriculum is usually presented in an increasing range of subject options (see wecad00259). Broadly, there is a correspondence between ISCED levels and student age and in many countries primary education (ISCED Level 1) will begin with those between the ages of five and seven years and will continue up to between ten and twelve years. It should be noted that whilst many countries use words equivalent to “child” for those beginning primary education, the word “pupil” is used in many English-speaking countries. Although “student” is often reserved for those beyond secondary level (e.g., at university), this term is increasingly being used for those at earlier levels.

Availability of schooling

Whilst a basic primary education is state-provided in most countries, this is by no means the norm, especially in regions of low income. That many children are entirely missing out on a basic education has long been recognized and different global education initiatives have attempted to address this. For example, regarding UNESCO’s Education For All (EFA) framework, among the goals pledged at the World Education Forum (held in Dakar, 2000) by 164 governments was the provision by 2015 of a basic education of good quality without cost and that school attendance should be compulsory. This would apply to all children including those vulnerable and disadvantaged and those belonging to ethnic minorities, and that gender equality in education would be achieved. Running largely in parallel with EFA was the Millennium Development Project (MDP). Its Goals, also set internationally and to be achieved by 2015, focused more directly on a universal primary education. Progress on the goals for both initiatives monitored by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics suggest that while

overall enrolment rates in developing regions have followed some upward trends, having reached 91 per cent in 2015, there is some variance both in terms of the rate over time and the rate within different regions. Notably, in Sub-Saharan Africa the rate, even though increases in enrolment since 2000 were relatively large, did not exceed 80 per cent. In terms of numbers, in comparison to 100 million out-of-school children in 2000, an estimated 57 million out-of-school children of primary school age worldwide in 2015 is still large. Non-attendance or failure to complete primary education is more likely to occur in cases of poverty, special needs, armed conflict and rapid growth in the numbers of children of primary school age. Additional factors include gender (boys more likely to attend school than girls) and disparities in urban and rural settings (the average out-of-school rate in rural areas being higher than the rate in urban areas); the rural-urban gap being acute in developing countries regarding pre-primary education, primary school completion and the likelihood that a child will transition from primary to secondary school (UNESCO, 2015).

Where education is provided and children do attend school, the quality can be compromised through overcrowded classrooms, lack of basic teaching resources such as pens, paper and books and teachers not being adequately trained or frequently absent. Even though some positive trends have been reported, the goals relating to the EFA and MDP initiatives have not been met (UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO, 2015; UN, 2015a) and from 2016 a new “Agenda for Sustainable Development” has been adopted internationally. Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030 is an inclusive, equitable and quality education and lifelong learning as well as teacher training (UN, 2015b).

School systems and their organisation at national level

In most countries where schooling is provided and administered by government there is a full-time requirement for all children that applies to a significant part of the working day, week and year. On the basis that most countries regard basic skills around literacy and numeracy as essential, the beginning of compulsory education usually coincides with that for primary schooling at which point these skills are taught. While the majority of countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) require children to start primary school at age 6, Australia, New Zealand, England and Scotland require children to begin at the age of 5. For a number of other countries including Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Russian Federation and Sweden, children may begin at the age of 7.

Public or state-run education at national level is often the responsibility of a ministry (or department) of education, which is usually concerned with the quality of overall school provision including the curriculum. In some countries the education system is relatively centralized and uniform while in others it may be subject to variation with some responsibilities being devolved down to a more local or municipal level. Where national curricula do exist there are varying degrees of control over content and teaching method.

School systems not administered by government can be private (sometimes called “independent” or “non-state”) or associated with religious groups. In the case of private schools, funding is usually through tuition fees and students may also be selected on judged academic merit or particular aptitudes, with the nature or level of the curriculum adjusted in

accordance with this. Where education is established through religious affiliation this may link with historical or wider cultural factors. Schools with a religious affiliation may teach the range of subjects found elsewhere but may also teach religious education and uphold the beliefs, principles and practices belonging to a particular faith. In terms of the school setting this usually becomes manifest in the nature of assemblies, prayers and other activities, the provision of facilities, what is worn, festivities and any rituals or customs. While schools not established by a specific religious group may acknowledge religious festivals (such as Eid or Christmas) this is not universal and countries with a secular government (as distinct from atheist) may regard religion and public life as separate. The French public education system, for example, is consistent with this in that, in addition to religious instruction or any other activities not taking place, any form of religious symbol (e.g., the display or wearing of crucifixes, burqas or other forms of religious dress) is banned. Other consequences of this are that students are not separated for activities that might otherwise be in accordance with a religion.

In view of the many initiatives on inclusion, providing for children with difficulties in learning and special needs is a major consideration. A key principle that an inclusive education system can only be effective if mainstream schools become more inclusive emerged from the World Conference on Special Needs Education (Salamanca, 1994) and inclusive education was adopted internationally in 2006 under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and subsequently ratified by most countries worldwide. While some countries continued to segregate provision (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011), the social model of special needs and inclusive education within mainstream schools is largely being taken up incrementally with many countries having hybrid policies (UNESCO, 2015).

Organisation at school level

Levels of education are often reflected in the way providing institutions are organized. In many countries, primary schools are physically separate from nurseries or kindergartens and, in turn, separate from other institutions such as secondary schools or colleges. Although there is an increasing number of “all through” schools catering from early childhood to secondary education, the main phases are often confined to different areas within the same school. Apart from boarding schools (often privately run) where in-house accommodation is organized, the vast majority of schools are those that pupils travel to and from on a daily basis.

For the majority of schools, students are usually grouped into year cohorts based upon age. In England, for example, those born between the beginning of September and the end of the following August are grouped together as a school “year”. The terms “grade” or “form” can also signify a given year-group (although “grade” is potentially ambiguous as it has other uses such as to signify a level of assessment). For many countries School Year 1 coincides with the beginning of compulsory schooling, with students moving on to School Year 2, and so on, until the end of compulsory period. Although school years can correlate with student age, in addition to compulsory education beginning at different ages in different countries, there is some variation in that students may be required to repeat a year of schooling if they have not met certain educational standards. While this practice of “grade retention” within

primary schools is common in countries such as Spain, France and Belgium as well as occurring in the Netherlands, Mexico, Ireland, the United States, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago, Indonesia, Peru and Hong Kong-China, it is less common in others such as Poland, Greece and the United Kingdom (Borodankova & de Almeida Coutinho, 2011; Ikeda & García, 2014).

In addition to year groups, pupils may be further organized into class groups for teaching and other activities. While larger schools will have more than one class of pupils for each school year, to form a viable number smaller schools may combine children from two or more year-stages as a “multigrade”. Where there are sufficient numbers of children for more than one class per year intake to be established then further groupings (e.g., judged ability) may occur, although this is less common than at secondary level. Other considerations at primary level include the allocation of teachers to classes. Usually, pupils will remain with the same one teacher over the course of a school year, with another teacher for the following year. Whilst a one-teacher, one-class model can allow teachers to develop skills and experience for a given year-group this may limit the scope for teachers and pupils to build a social and working relationship in comparison to models such as a teacher remaining with the same class over more than one year. While primary teachers are expected to cover most of the curriculum, other possibilities have been adopted such as children primarily grouped in one main class but taught by specialist teachers for some subjects (e.g., science, music).

School size

School size, in terms pupil enrolment, varies considerably within and across countries. An analysis of Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS 2011) data carried out by Scheerens et al. (2014) shows averages in primary school size ranging from between 200 and 300 pupils in some countries in Central Europe and Scandinavia to over 1000 in Korea, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Singapore and Chinese Taipei. School size can have a direct bearing on pupil experience. For example, while smaller schools for a given population-area may be more numerous and entail easier journeys (which can affect attendance rates) there is a trade-off in terms of the resources they have available. Very small schools may have a limited number of teachers and in extreme cases one teacher may be required to meet the needs of learners of widely differing ages across different curriculum areas and levels with materials and support not designed for such groupings. Apart from some rural areas, such compromises may also occur in regions that are economically and socially disadvantaged or marked by conflict and civil strife (Little, 2008). Further compromises can occur in areas of high density population where schools can be overcrowded leading to effects such as large class sizes and scheduling breaks and lunch periods at times that are less than ideal.

Class size

In view of its association with factors such as student-teacher ratio, performance, meeting the needs of students and parental choice, class size has been dominant when comparing school settings. Apart from the extremes indicated above, recent figures show an average of 21

pupils per primary classroom across OECD countries and apart from China, Chile, India, Israel and Japan there were fewer than 26 pupils in nearly all countries where data are available. However, there were some notable variations with China on average having the largest classes (37 pupils) followed by Chile (30 pupils) down to Latvia, Lithuania and Luxembourg where classes had fewer than 17 pupils. Student-teacher ratios were also found to vary from an average of 15 students per teacher, ranging from 27 students in Mexico to 10 or fewer in Greece, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Norway (OECD, 2016).

Pupil populations

Apart from any selection based on gender, judged ability or aptitude, pupils in any one school can be very diverse in terms of their needs and their backgrounds. Migration, for reasons including political, social, economic or environmental, is a significant feature in many countries and, in addition to the existence of established minority populations, the movement of people in the 21st century has grown not only in scale and rapidity but also in terms of its rate of diversity. Those arriving in a country may be of multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified and the dynamic interplay of the variables different languages, faiths, beliefs, identities, attitudes, perspectives and practices contributes to a “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2007) that can impact upon many schools. Moreover, the rapidity of movement can lead to fluctuation in the composition of the population in any one region over time and many schools are therefore likely to have a proportion of pupils whose enrolment is subject to instability.

Linguistic diversity

Language is a key part of cultural heritage and in addition to an official language of instruction for a country, pupils can be exposed to and use other languages in their home settings. In England, for example, figures collected in a 2017 school census reported by the Department for Education indicate that 32.1 per cent of pupils in state-funded primary schools were of minority ethnic origin (defined as any origin other than White British). Primary school pupil numbers were also reported to be increasing and that minority ethnic pupils made up 66.3 per cent of that increase between 2016 and 2017. 20.6 per cent of pupils were also reported to be exposed to a language known or believed to be other than English in their home (DfE, 2017). A diversity of languages was also reported including European, Asian and African with some languages (e.g., Polish) found to be widely distributed while others (e.g., Yiddish) confined to a limited number of smaller areas. Such multilingual landscapes can impact upon the school setting in terms of in-house specialist support, resources and staff training needed (see wecad00131 and wecad00263). Sensitivity to the distinction between children of minority ethnic origin and those who have recently migrated is also needed in that in addition to any language demands that may arise with minority ethnic pupils (see wecad00122), migrant children who are relatively new to the country are presented with additional challenges such as adjusting to a new environment, its school system and practices (see wecad00262).

Curriculum and learning approaches

A conception of primary teaching presented by UNESCO (2012) is an integrated approach where activities are often organized around units, projects or broad learning areas rather than lessons that are focused on specific subjects. While within this there is scope for wide variation in curriculum content across different countries, findings on the content of primary education in many countries worldwide suggest that intended (rather than implemented) curricular categories and emphases on them tend to be similar around the world and across very disparate countries (Meyer et al., 1992/2017). Although they acknowledge data limitations on specific content and materials, Meyer et al. argue that broad influences on the primary curriculum date from changes in the late nineteenth century and reflect local and national interests and requirements which also reflect worldwide forces. For example, emphasis on economic and scientific progress, can be reflected across the curriculum and less emphasis to religious instruction could occur where approaches to social life are more rationalistic and secularized. This is consistent with more recent data available through the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks archive (INCA, 2013). These suggest that in all the countries studied (across the UK, Ireland, Mainland Europe, Australia, Canada, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, USA), available subjects throughout the primary years were ‘mother tongue’, mathematics, art and music, and although not presented discretely, science topics fell into areas such as the environment, and that topics relating to history and geography existed more broadly within social studies. However, some variation was also evident in the onset of foreign language teaching and the number of languages taught and, apart from the United Kingdom and Germany, religious education was not listed. Physical education (PE) was generally available throughout the primary phase although some variation was noted for South Africa, Korea and Switzerland. Further insights into PE provision arise from a study spanning Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America/Caribbean, Middle East, North America and Oceania (UNESCO, 2014). While PE is a legal requirement in most countries noncompliance was found, particularly in countries where curriculum responsibility is devolved locally. This study also points to other contemporary factors that as well as impacting on the emphasis and nature of PE could have broader implications across the curriculum (see wecad00070 and wecad00265). These include a perceived obesity epidemic and links between physical education and health education and with personal and social development are occurring in some countries. An emphasis on competitive sport and related extra-curricular activity structures was regarded as counter to societal trends. Greater consideration of inclusion for pupils with special needs was also reported and whilst deficiencies in provision are more evident in low income countries, these can also remain in higher income countries. Financial cutbacks in the education sector affect curricular provision as well as associated physical resource provision and while this is more likely to be inadequate in schools in low income countries and regions, this divide in middle and high-income regions and countries is not always clear-cut. It was also noted that issues with clothing, religio-cultural dispositions and parental discouragement were contributory factors in the reluctance of girls to engage in PE.

The school year

The year is the usual time unit around which schooling is organized. For most countries, the academic year begins in late summer or early autumn and ends in the following spring or summer. For countries in the Northern Hemisphere this is typically from around September to July while in the Southern Hemisphere the academic year runs from around December and in either case longer holidays are usually in the summer. In the UK and much of Europe the year is divided into 3 academic terms (e.g., Autumn, Spring and Summer) punctuated by holidays, or recesses, in December and March or April coinciding with Christian festivities such as Christmas or Easter and with a longer summer break covering August and part of July. In Islamic countries, religious holidays include Eid Al Adha (12 days) and Eid Al Fitr (one week) with the year usually divided either into three terms or two semesters. Other breaks observed include Diwali and Dussera (India) and 3 to 4 weeks for the Chinese New Year. In the U.S. the year is divided into two semesters which are in turn subdivided into two quarters. In Australia the academic year coincides roughly with the calendar year and is similarly divided two semesters each consisting of two terms. Apart from countries such as India (where the academic year runs from May or June to March). Differences both within and between countries include the school year running from August to May in some Nordic countries and the duration of summer breaks can vary from around 6 weeks in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom to around 13 weeks in Italy, and Turkey.

The school day

Most schools operate on a 5-day-week basis (with exceptions such as a six-day-week) and primary schools usually have slightly shorter days than secondary schools. Lessons usually begin in the morning, sometimes following an assembly for the whole school or sub-sections such as a year-group. While teaching activities in countries such as Germany and Italy are largely confined to the morning, in other countries these may continue to mid- or late afternoon. There are many variations, China, for example, reported as having up to a 12-hour day and Spain having a larger break in the middle of the day before afternoon lessons resume. A more recent tendency is to run lessons from around 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. 'non-stop' followed by extra-curricular activities. Lesson durations, often between approximately half and one hour, can vary according the teaching model adopted with some activities extending over more than one lesson period. Breaks between lessons can take the form of 'playtime' or 'lunchtime' and there may be opportunities for pupils to play or socialize inside or outside the main school buildings in designated spaces such as common rooms and playgrounds, eat or drink, and also leave school to return home for an allowed period.

Physical structure and amenities available

In many countries schools are purpose-built and teaching occurs in classrooms that are discrete areas of sufficient size to accommodate a group of pupils, a teacher, desks or other working surfaces and resources such as a large board for writing or drawing together with other learning materials. Some schools are organized on an open plan system where a larger space can accommodate several groups of students and teachers. Environmental conditions can dictate alternatives (e.g., boat schools in Bangladesh in response to seasonal flooding)

and there are numerous reports of schools in poor and remote regions that are make-shift, not in enclosed spaces, without a roof and without access to electricity or running water.

Where resources allow, other academic components of a school may include a library with a collection of books and other publications and, quite commonly, computers with internet access available for student use. Computers may also be available singly in classrooms or in larger numbers in other areas dedicated for their use and, though less usual at primary level, there may also be specialist areas (e.g., science, art). Larger spaces such as a hall may exist for whole-school assemblies or other events as well as lunch provision or other refreshments if there is no purpose-built eating area. Schools may also have provision for physical education such as a gymnasium, swimming pool or sports field (see wecad00040). Playgrounds or school yards may be available for pupils during breaks and offices exist for administrative work. With regard to pupil and staff safety, security measures are becoming increasingly noticeable. In the UK, for example, high metal fences surround many schools and the identity of those entering and leaving is monitored. Video surveillance is not uncommon, as are whole-school procedures in case of events such as fire or acts of terrorism.

The impact of digital technology on the school setting

New technologies can impact on school settings. While computers, interactive displays and other digital devices are a common feature, as digital connectivity develops its influence extends beyond and in one sense blurs the physical boundaries of the school setting. Pupils can communicate with each other as well as with school staff and access school resources at home or on hand held devices which they can also use to communicate with each other on school matters. Even though elements of a digital divide persist, through technology leapfrogging such connectivity can also apply to developing as well as to developed countries. Digital technology can have an accessibility and appeal that results in some schools using it as a replacement for other resources and concerns have been raised regarding the limiting effect on practical activities, and that book collections in some school libraries are being replaced by computer terminals (see wecad00294).

Virtual schools

In addition to being entirely characterized by physical location, through digital connectivity schools can also take on a virtual dimension and become less bound by time and space. Virtual- (or online- or cyber-) schools operating through an intranet or the internet can range from those that are asynchronous and rely on automatic presentation of a fixed body of materials which students can respond to in their own time (as with more established models of distance education), to those that are synchronous in that they allow live input from teachers who are able to interact in real time with a group of students, each in their own individual (e.g., home) setting. While the number of students working asynchronously can be very large, synchronous engagement is more likely to be effective with smaller numbers of pupils, akin to a physical class, concurrently in online attendance for a given lesson. In the latter case, the teacher would typically be in control and use resources and forms of communication (e.g., speech, text, images) in modalities commonly available through the

technology. These might include forums for discussion, a range of activities, exercises and forms of assessment that might resemble face-to-face encounters. The dynamics of social engagement in learning in the context of virtual schools have yet to be explored and in addition to what may take place between teachers and students, as with other forms of digital connectivity, there is potential for continued peer-to-peer engagement within the context of virtual school systems. Although economic and other circumstances can prevent take-up, the possible use of virtual schooling in whole or in part in geographic regions such as rural settings, where student populations are small and teachers not available, or where physical access to schooling is difficult, is widely recognized. Similarly, virtual schools can supplement homeschooling (see wecad00239) and in England local authorities with a responsibility for education have used virtual schools as a means of addressing inclusion and educational attainment for looked-after children. In these cases, virtual school teams and headteachers have taken on a variety of roles including management as well as relations at staff and pupil level (OFSTED, 2012). Virtual schooling across the school years is widespread and continues to be explored (e.g., Clarke & Barbour, 2015 for a review).

See Also

wecad00040
wecad00070
wecad00122
wecad00131
wecad00239
wecad00259
wecad00262
wecad00263
wecad00265
wecad00294

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Biography:

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