



### Child-Friendly Schools: Interview with Dr. Cream Wright, Global Chief of Education

#### Q. What is a child-friendly school?



**A.** The child-friendly school is a very broad approach that UNICEF is adopting as a way of promoting quality education in schools. School is a place that cares about every child

and where every child should succeed, and that is quality at its best – and that kind of quality attracts children. Child-friendly schools are primarily focused on the needs of the child, and the whole child, so it is not that school is just a place for learning, period. School is a place where children feel all their needs are being met in some way whilst they are there and that they are safe, they are confident and that they can learn, and learning becomes fun.

#### Q. Why is UNICEF promoting this model of education?

**A.** Well, the initiative is all about quality. In fact, it represents a package of almost everything that UNICEF has worked on in quality over the years through pedagogy, how teachers can promote learning. Different children learn in different ways, and a good teacher actually takes that into account and tries various ways so that all children can learn what the teacher is trying to put across. Materials being available in schools, whether it's textbooks, exercise books, teaching aids or learning aids, provide stimulation in the class environment, and the very environment of the school itself. Most of our work on quality shows that where certain things are absent, children tend to drop out of school. For instance, we all know the issues around no water in the schools, no

separate sanitation for boys and girls. Children tend to drop out where the school is a difficult place for them to be in, or where kids go to school in the morning and they are expected to sit in class all day, they haven't eaten anything all day. So, everything we have learned about quality that helps not only get children to access but continue attending school regularly, all of that has been packaged into what we call a child-friendly school.

#### Q. Where has it been successfully implemented?

**A.** In East Asia, for instance, there is quite a lot of evidence that child-friendly schools do make a difference, and in some of those countries governments have actually adopted these as a policy measure. That's what we are trying to move towards. Because you can try making schools in some communities child-friendly, but until it becomes a national policy and until we provide the right capacity-building for this, it's not going to happen across the system.

#### Q. How else does UNICEF contribute to promoting child-friendly schools?

**A.** Child-friendly schools now represent the UNICEF model for quality, so that's one contribution. We work with a lot of partners, not only governments but other agencies, the World Bank, UNESCO and so on. We think it's a contribution that can mean not only that you get all children in school but that schools become much more successful in doing what they're supposed to do. That is, look out for the best interests of children, in terms of what children learn, the environment in which they learn and what they become as a result of schooling.

**Q. Does the model reach out to girls?**

**A.** A child-friendly school has to be sensitive to gender issues, both for girls and boys, and that boys understand how they behave towards others, particularly towards girls. But also there's an awareness of the extra burden on girls, whether it's housework or not allowing them to study enough. And therefore, in child-friendly schools, we allow some special time for girls, and for children in general, to do some private study in school.

**Q. What distinguishes 'child-friendly' from other learning environments?**

**A.** The difference is really stark between your average school and a school that is really moving along a child-friendly path. Not only school officials but parents also are beginning to see the difference. Children themselves come out of these schools much more confident and have learned a lot more, they can express themselves more clearly. There is a great deal of all-round development in the schools for facilitated learning and providing for all the needs of children. It's a major shift in thinking, really, in what schools are for and how they should be organized.

**Q. Are local communities involved?**

**A.** One of the aspects of a child-friendly school is that it is very strongly linked to the community because children bring with them to school things from home and the community – in terms of their personality, their minds, their attitudes, their values and so on – and they take home things from school in the same way. A child-friendly school builds very strong links with the communities so that parents have a certain amount of confidence in what the school is doing. Parents are supportive when the school needs support from parents.

**Q. Is there a set standard that defines a school as reaching child-friendly status?**

**A.** A school becomes child-friendly not when it achieves a certain status but when it begins to walk along a certain path. One of the key issues that we promote is learning, and teachers are key, of course, in facilitating learning. The design of the building, the design of the classroom space, it's all meant to give priority to what are the best interests of the child. In a child-friendly classroom within a school, for instance, we promote the idea of interactive learning. You don't have 40 or 50 children sitting looking at a teacher in front, but you have children who are very active, walking in various corners of the room, who are in a room that has a lot of resources, some of them home-made, locally made, but a very stimulating environment for them to learn and a teacher who organizes the learning activities. And within the school, child participation is encouraged. Children feel that they can speak up, that they can give their viewpoints.

**Q. Do you find these concepts can be applied effectively across countries and cultures?**

**A.** You don't have to have everything. That's why we say it's a path you keep walking on. I think of the expression that 'the longest journey starts with the first step', and every school can get on that first step. It might be just having water in a school that didn't have water before, digging a borehole, that might be the difference. I have seen schools in very poor areas of rural Uganda and their grounds are well kept and the children feel very much a part of their school. It's a thatch-roof school, but you can see it's clean, and you can see the bright colors around the wall in the school, in the classroom. You can see the children happy and loud, as children are, you know. They're engaged, they are learning, and you can see the enthusiasm in the teachers. There are things that you watch in some communities. There may be cultures where, for instance, they are feeling that you shouldn't mix boys with girls in a classroom. They may be cautious. But with appropriate regard for each culture, there is nothing to stop the school from being child-friendly.