

STRONG POLICIES TO BENEFIT YOUNG CHILDREN

Education for All Global Monitoring Report Team

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Abstract

To ensure children strong foundations, early childhood care and education needs to move up the domestic and international agenda. Judging by the figures, however, the case for ECCE is far from universally recognized. *Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education*, the new edition of the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* (www.efareport.unesco.org) describes how this can happen through strong commitment, the development of national policy frameworks for children from birth to age 8, more public financing and a better trained workforce.

Judging by the figures, the case for early childhood care and education is far from universally recognized. *Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education*, the new edition of the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* (www.efareport.unesco.org), notes that participation at the pre-primary level has tripled over the past three decades but remains extremely low in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States and South and West Asia – the three regions farthest from achieving the six Education for All goals set in 2000. The situation for children under age 3 who are at a particularly fragile and vulnerable period, is cause for even greater concern: fewer than half of all developing countries have a single formal program for this age group.

Restating the Case

Policies for early childhood need, first and foremost, to be rooted in the conviction that interventions in the first years of a child's life truly matter. The case is overwhelming, based both on rights – early childhood rights are increasingly recognized – and on reducing poverty: early childhood programs can offset the disadvantages of being born poor or being a member of a social minority, at much lower cost than programs for older children or adults.

Integrated programs that combine health, nutrition and cognitive stimulation can significantly improve a child's immediate well-being. For the most disadvantaged children, in fact, these programs can be a matter of sheer survival. They contribute to the Millennium Development Goals related to child and maternal health. A child born in the developing world has a four-in-ten chance of living in extreme poverty. About 10.5 million children die each year before age 5, most of them from preventable diseases. In short, young children today are under severe threat.

Beyond this, programs smooth the transition to the first grade and improve Children's chances of doing well in school, thereby improving the efficiency of education systems. In sub-Saharan Africa, over two-thirds of children who start primary school do not reach the last grade much less complete it. This points to severe gaps in educational quality in addition to such perennial obstacles as school fees. Controlling for GDP, the higher an African country's pre-primary enrolment ratio, the higher its primary school completion rate and the lower its primary repetition rate. Gender parity is also advanced through early childhood care and

education (ECCE) programmes: when young children participate in these programs, they relieve their older sisters or female kin of care-giving responsibilities which often prevents them from going to school.

Early childhood programs yield very high economic returns, especially for children from poor families. These findings are not new: the most rigorous study, known as the High/Scope Perry Preschool program, originated in the United States in the early 1960s. In this study, researchers followed a group of low-income African-American children for more than 40 years. The results showed very significant benefits for participants who, compared to the control group, were more successful in schools and enjoyed higher earnings later in life. A growing body of evidence from developing countries points to the high cost/benefit ratios, especially for the most disadvantaged children.

Comprehensive ECCE programmes that support children's right to care, protection and education can make a major difference in reducing hunger, child mortality and other health goals. As such, ECCE programmes are a powerful contributor to reducing poverty, the overarching objective of the Millennium Development Goals.

Key Policy Dimensions

These benefits are not sufficiently recognized in developing countries, nor are they taken seriously by the majority of donors. Countries and the donor community tend to rally behind the goal of universal primary education and to neglect early childhood and adult literacy programs. This is a mistake. The Millennium Development Goals on health, gender quality and education are intricately related to providing quality early childhood programmes because supporting children and their parents during these early years establishes strong foundations for all future learning.

What Is Required To Put Early Childhood On The Policy Map?

First, political commitment at the highest level must expressly recognize that early childhood care and education is an economic and social priority. This is the case in Senegal, for example, where President Abdoulaye Wade has promoted early childhood programs as a lever for improving children's living conditions. He introduced a national program of community-based centres for 0 to 6 year-olds integrating health, education and nutrition. Another approach was taken in Ghana where basic education is currently being expanded to include two years of kindergarten. The two-fold motivations for this shift include the fact that too many children are still out of school and too many face enormous difficulties, and that the African extended family system is losing its hold with urbanization and social change. In Chile, President Michelle Bachelet took measures to improve the early childhood protection system soon after her election in early 2006. Under a national plan known as "Chile grows up with you," the country is expanding the coverage of early childhood development programs to offer every child and family access to services such as education, early stimulation, maternity and health care.

Second, broad stakeholder involvement is an indispensable ingredient for designing a national policy for early childhood. The sector is a complex one: it covers children from birth to age six, typically involves several ministries (women's affairs, social affairs, health, education), private sector organizations, non-governmental organizations and communities themselves. The very process of engaging with these various players is a first step towards ensuring ownership of national policies. Involving parents as advocates is a particularly effective way to promote sustainable programmes.

Third, detailed action plans facilitate the implementation of ECCE policies by identifying the division of responsibilities, the allocation of resources and the time-frame for implementation. A

growing number of countries are consolidating responsibility for all forms of ECCE under one ministry to increase policy coherence. Since the late 1980s, the trend has been towards designating education as the lead ministry for children from birth. Regardless of which ministry takes the lead, coordination is necessary across all institutions and sectors involved in early childhood and family issues. Experiences in several countries suggest that an inter-ministerial body can help promote national coordination of policies and actions, provided it is adequately resourced.

Fourth, partnerships with international organizations or aid agencies can generate seed money for projects that can be taken to scale, and also provide technical assistance for national planning. UNICEF has formed partnerships with many countries around the world and assisted a number of governments to elaborate national early childhood policies that cover health, nutrition, education, water, hygiene, sanitation and legal protection for young children. Investment and technical support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation led to Kenya's Preschool Education project focusing on community-based programmes for 3- to 5-year olds.

Fifth, aligning ECCE policies with other national and sector development policies is a strategic means to leverage resources for early childhood. Increasingly, in the poorest countries, development funding is focused on broad poverty reduction strategies and on sector-wide programmes. Ghana, Uganda and Zambia, for example, are integrating early childhood into Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers.

Sixth, strategic use of public campaigns draws attention to early childhood and provides information to carers. Media campaigns about child-care practices and existing programmes and projects are vital to raise awareness among parents, carers and communities.

Financing Choices

The diversity of financing sources for early childhood – and the low overall level of funding for this sector – raises difficult policy choices. Spending on pre-primary is less than 10 percent of public spending on education as a whole. The burden often falls on parents. Even in relatively rich countries the parental share can run as high as 60 percent. The private sector plays a prominent role in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States, the Caribbean and East Asia. While a diversity of partners is desirable, public policy must ensure that regulations exist and are applied equally to public and private settings. Otherwise, there is a risk of a two-track system developing with children from more advantaged families attending more expensive and higher quality programmes and less fortunate families resorting to low-cost, lower quality public alternatives, if there are any. As it stands today, across most of the developing world, household poverty is the major barrier to access of early childhood programmes.

The EFA early childhood goal places special emphasis on reaching the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children. These are the children likely to draw most benefit from ECCE programmes yet those with least access to them. This has implications for policy. Developing a universal policy applicable to all children that clarifies issues related to governance, curriculum, pedagogy, expected outcomes and quality assurance offers an overall framework. But in the context of many developing and low-income countries, this policy may best be implemented through a phase-in approach whereby resources are targeted towards the most disadvantaged children, either geographically or by income group. India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), for example, provides a package of services to vulnerable children under 6 in city slums, tribal areas and remote regions. The federal government has recently renewed its commitment to universalize ICDS in light of its positive, if uneven, impact on children's survival, growth and development.

More Spending on Training

Good early childhood programmes can compensate for disadvantage and strongly influence children's development – their health, cognitive and language abilities and social interactions. A particularly interesting and consistent research finding is that the relationship between carers and children is the single most important determinant of quality in these early years, over and above availability of play materials or other 'inputs'. Better training and support to staff – whether in communities or formal centres is imperative. Typically early childhood caregivers receive less training than primary school staff both before they start work and less on-the-job support. A starting point is to work with communities – to empower community members to support and complement the care that children receive at home. In Colombia, the *Hogares Comunitarios* program serves more than one million children in both urban and rural areas. Elected 'community mothers' open their home to as many as fifteen children, giving them three meals a day. Community members can also provide play materials and contribute to building play sites, as in Kenya's pastoralist societies or in Pakistan where parents in poor rural communities become resource people, teaching local songs and stories to young children.

Staffing policies are under review in a number of countries to develop a more integrated system of provision and regulation from birth to school entry. In Singapore, for example, all child care and pre-school personnel now undergo the same training and accreditation, which has increased the pool of trained staff. In Ghana, all 38 Teacher Training Colleges are offering ECCE as a core compulsory subject. Senegal is creating a masters programme in early childhood development. The Early Childhood Development Virtual University (see article in this JEID Issue) promotes leadership development and builds capacity through online and in-person training across Africa and the Arab States. To ease children's transition from ECCE to primary schooling, several countries are implementing strategies for professional continuity, namely joint training for teachers at both levels to encourage connections and coherence in teaching styles.

Finally, the quality of programmes can be measured by the extent to which they promote inclusion. Programmes are more likely to be effective if they are delivered in the child's mother tongue. Countries including Papua New Guinea, Viet Nam, Cambodia and Malaysia have developed effective bilingual early childhood programmes that have influenced practices in the first years of primary education. Programmes should promote positive gender socialization and integrate children with disabilities and other special needs.

Assessing program quality should not only focus on easy-to-measure indicators such as class size and child/staff ratios but also the quality of relationships between carers and children, the inclusion of families and respect for children's diverse cultural backgrounds. Several international instruments exist to assess ECCE quality, and include attention to family participation, teacher-child interaction, health and safety and teaching strategies. Governments need to enforce, not just develop, regulations that promote quality. If resources are insufficient to assure inspection and monitoring, accreditation is an alternative. It encourages programme staff to reflect on their practice and to address any limitations before having their work validated by an external expert.

Boosting International Support

Early childhood is a low priority for international aid. This must change. Most donors allocate less than 10% to pre-primary compared to what they allocate to primary, and these funds tend to be for pre-primary centre-based instruction rather than for children under age 3. Such funding priorities do not necessarily match country needs: less formal and less costly arrangements than centres can often help reach more young children of all ages. Aid to ECCE needs to be considered within the broader aid coordination mechanisms for education and health, including the Fast Track Initiative.

Conclusion

To ensure children strong foundations, ECCE needs to move up the domestic and international agenda. This can happen through strong commitment, the development of national policy frameworks for children from birth to age 8, more public financing and a better trained workforce. For millions of children around the world growing up in extremely difficult circumstances, such programmes are a right and a route out of poverty, leading to improved well-being and a much higher chance of benefiting from educational opportunities throughout life.

The full report, summary report, background papers commissioned for this report and country profiles on early childhood care and education policies are available on the website at www.efareport.unesco.org For more information please contact efareport@unesco.org