The Importance of Early Childhood Development to Education

Prepared for the Global Meeting of the Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda

Dakar, March 18-19, 2013
Current and future global development goals, including education goals, will only be met with attention to the overall development of young children (0-8 years).

This must be within the context of a human development and rights-based framework that promotes equitable and sustainable development and is implemented in partnership with multiple sectors and multiple partners.

BACKGROUND

Expansion and improvement of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is the first goal in the Education for All (EFA) Dakar Framework.

While progress has been made, most governments still do not prioritise early childhood in their health, education, poverty reduction or other national plans, and many countries still lack early childhood development policies, strategic plans and laws:

- Globally, 171 million children under 5 were affected by moderate or severe stunting in 2010 – a clear sign of malnutrition which impacts children’s cognitive development and capacity to learn. Based on current trends, by 2015, one in four children under the age 5 will suffer from stunting.
- 57% of young children in developing countries have NO ACCESS to preschool – 83% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 78% in the Arab region.
- Children living in the poorest households are up to 10 times less likely to attend early childhood education programmes than those living in the richest.

Over 200 million children under 5 years of age in low and middle-income countries – and increasing numbers in OECD countries and emerging economies – will not reach their full developmental potential because they grow up facing a broad range of risk factors, most notably poverty; poor health including HIV/AIDS and malnutrition; high levels of family and environmental stress and exposure to violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation, and inadequate levels of care and learning opportunities. This includes risks that result from emergencies related to conflict, climate change and global demographic shifts through migration and urbanisation.

Neuroscience conclusively demonstrates the critical impact that early experiences have on brain architecture and that negative conditions and experiences in the early years, including as a result of conflict and emergencies, can have a permanent impact on all aspects of an individual’s life and consequently the social and economic development and human capital formation of a nation.

Despite commitments and progress in improving access to education at the global level, including Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 on universal primary education and the Education for All (EFA) Goals, levels of learning are still too low. At least 250 million primary school-age children around the world are not able to read, write or count well enough to meet minimum learning standards, including those who have spent at least four years in school.
KEY MESSAGES

1. **Learning begins at birth.** The early years, defined as from zero to age eight, are the foundation for lifelong learning. ECD programmes provide the essential base for the achievement of all EFA goals and contribute powerfully to reducing poverty, the overarching objective of the MDGs, and to achieving social justice.

2. **Costly wastage in both financial and human terms can be avoided by investments in good quality early primary education combined with quality early childhood services prior to children entering school.** This improves the efficiency of the schooling system and saves money by reducing repetition and drop-out and improving completion rates and achievement, especially for girls and marginalised groups.\(^\text{13}\) It is the continued exclusion of some groups that works against the achievement of EFA goals and the MDGs.

3. **The real systemic failure in education is in early primary – yet it receives almost no attention.** The emphasis on completion of primary has distracted attention from the heart of the problem – the fact that it is in the first two years of school that the majority of drop-out occurs. Many of those who continue in school end up in persistent patterns of underachievement and leave school unable to read fluently or calculate, let alone problem solve and think critically. The earliest grades are often taught by the least experienced and trained teacher, have the largest class sizes, fewest hours of learning per week and few if no materials. Schools must be ready for all children, whether or not they have had the opportunity to participate in an early childhood programme and are ready for school.

4. **The evidence is clear: governments and donors cannot afford not to invest in strengthening ECD programmes.** The 2011 *Lancet* Series on ECD calculated the economic effect of preschool enrolment – just one component of a comprehensive early childhood development agenda – on reducing the schooling gap showing a benefit of USD$10.6 billion by increasing preschool enrolment to 25% in all low-income and middle-income countries, and USD$33.7 billion by increasing preschool enrolment to 50%, with a benefit-to-cost ratio from 6.4 to 17.6 – one of the best returns on investment.\(^\text{14}\)

**An Urgent Call to Action**

Investment in young children must be a cornerstone of national government policies, development cooperation, global frameworks and responsible business practices. The Consultative Group on ECCD calls on the Education community to commit to actions such that children are ready for school and schools are ready for children.
Reducing the learning gap by the age of 8 between the richest and poorest 10% includes ensuring that all children start school on time, ready to learn and acquire basic learning competencies by age 8.

This calls for:

* Expansion of quality early childhood programmes especially for the most marginalised including at least one year of quality pre-school as an integral part of education systems universally. Quality programs are operated by trained educators, use child-centered approaches, engage families and communities in children’s learning, support children’s mother-tongue language, use culturally-relevant materials and offer opportunities to play and explore.

* Increased investment in the early primary grades (1 to 3) as an indispensable component of education reform to ensure children have well-trained and effective teachers and a teacher-pupil ratio of no more than 1:30. Early grade investments will improve learning outcomes and efficiency at every level of education systems. Primary education budgets, teacher qualifications, and pupil-teacher ratios should be reported by grade so that allocations to early grades can be tracked.

* Reducing the learning gap by the age of 8 between the richest and poorest 10%:
  » Ensure all children start school on time, ready to learn and acquire basic learning competencies by age 8
  » Reduce by half the number of children unable to read with fluency and comprehension by age 8
  » Make children’s learning outcomes the metric of success for ECD investment. Whether preschool or early primary, we have ample evidence that “quality” is only defined by inputs – infrastructure, teacher qualifications, and other features – that are not consistently predictive of children’s learning. We need to ensure equity in both access and learning.

* Investment of at least 15% of international education aid into pre-primary and early childhood education programs.

* Allocation of at least 7% of annual Ministry of Education budgets to the pre-primary grades(s).

Achieving these goals and targets requires improvement in the global collection of quality data on indicators, cross-sectoral collaboration in developing effective implementation plans and strategies, and increased public and private sector investments.
The Importance of Early Childhood Development to Education

ENDNOTES


2 Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is also known as Early Childhood Development (ECD), Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) and encompasses early childhood education (ECE) and other designations.


15 Education First: An initiative of the Un Secretary-General (2012). See page 25 under 10 Key Actions: Strategy 1 under Action 8 – Instill lifelong learning includes increasing from 15-45%, participation in quality ECD programs for marginalized children in low-income countries.


The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (CGECCD) convenes, mobilizes, and engages global ECCD actors in order to generate and disseminate knowledge on ECCD for use in advocacy, policy, planning, capacity building, programming and evaluation research, aimed at improving the development of children, families and communities, especially those living in disadvantaged circumstances in low-and middle-income countries.

The CG’s post-2015 task team is working to ensure that early childhood development is an essential part of the global development agenda.

For more information and contact, Louise Zimanyi lzimanyi@ryerson.ca and see ecdgroup.com.