

Early childhood education: renewing focus and taking action in the Commonwealth

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A growing body of research has confirmed the developmental benefits of early childhood education (ECE) – including cognition, socio-emotional skills, language, motor skills, and visual and sensory skills – that put children on a firm footing for later success at school and in the workforce (Camilli et al., 2010; Barnett, 2008; Barnett and Nores, 2012). Other benefits at the societal level include school success and improved health (Engle et al., 2011), as well as poverty reduction and increased intergenerational social mobility (OECD, 2012). Research in the UK identified an association between ECE and gains in achievement and social behaviour (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2011). Research into universal childcare in Canada identified strong effects on maternal labour supply (Baker, Gruber and Milligan, 2008).

On the development agenda of Commonwealth nations, ECE has been closely tied to Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets to reduce poverty. But ‘one externality that economists sometimes neglect is the value of decreased inequalities’ (Barnett and Nores, 2012: 3). As UNICEF director of programmes, Nicholas Alipui, put it, ‘early childhood is a place where you see the highest level of disparity manifest itself... You can judge how well a country is doing by how well it is taking care of its youngest and most vulnerable children’ (UNICEF, 2010).

Yet, with all of the evidence suggesting the long-term benefits of ECE, why has there not been an explosion of projects in this area. Why, indeed, has it not received the same degree of status and attention as the goal of universal primary education? As of 2010, according to Lisa Jordan, executive director of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, ‘only 53 per cent of countries have comprehensive national early childhood development programmes’ (UNICEF, 2010). What is needed for this number to increase? This brief paper discusses and proposes three essential changes to renew the focus on ECE: innovative financing mechanisms; rethinking the role of an early childhood educator; and a reconceptualisation of ECE curricula and services that acknowledge both the individual child’s needs and the context in which he or she learns.

Exploring alternative financing of early childhood education

Many governments have trumpeted the long-term return on investment in ECE programmes and initiatives. Engle et al. (2011) estimated that boosting pre-kindergarten enrolments from 25 to 50 per cent, in the context of low- and middle-income countries, would yield improved educational success and increased earnings, with a benefit-to-cost ratio of between six and 17. The Special



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Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children reported that every dollar invested in early childhood yielded up to an US\$8 return (UNICEF, 2010). President Obama stated in a speech earlier this year, that ‘every dollar we invest in high-quality early childhood education can save more than seven dollars later on – by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime’ (NIEER, 2013). The real challenge is identifying what ‘later on’ actually means – when does the pay-off actually come to those making the investment? And what form does it take?

An even more difficult question to address, with the current global economic environment, ever-increasing challenges in international development, as well as limited financial resources to allocate, is why invest in long-term ECE programmes when urgent needs exist that potentially yield tangible returns more quickly, and when the budget cycle supports if not determines a focus on the short term? The answer is that we need to change the question to: How can we do things differently?

At the programmatic, organisational and government levels, we need to explore innovative financing alternatives. At the international level, industry, foundations and think tanks, rather than governments or development agencies, are pioneering such initiatives. In particular, the Global Impact Investing Network (GIIN) and Global Impact Investing Rating System (GIIRS) are leaders in convening discussion and research on potential new financing mechanisms for education, environment and ECE, among other development challenges. One of the newest innovations on the landscape is Pay for Success financing, or:

Financing for social services, in which investors – commercial investors, philanthropists, or impact investors – provide the upfront funding for projects, while government commits to pay a return based on the degree to which the projects are successful in improving social outcomes, thereby encouraging investment in the most cost-effective yet underfunded areas (Ochs, forthcoming: 3).

Such projects in the area of ECE, backed by a specific mechanism called a Social Impact Bond (SIB), include Teens and Toddlers in the UK, and a Goldman Sachs-backed initiative in the US state of Utah. Further SIB pilot projects to address other social issues are in the works in the UK, Australia, Canada and South Africa, while the Center for Global Development has launched its new working group on Development Impact Bonds.

Rethinking the role of an early childhood educator

While securing funding for ECE is one important aspect, more fundamental is rethinking the role of an early childhood educator, in terms of who delivers the services, where the education takes place, and how the educator or carer is trained and prepared. As Voluntary Services Abroad stated, ‘teachers’ interactions with learners is the axis on which educational quality turns’ (VSO, 2002: 10), and great attention has to be given to the role of ECE educators in delivering quality. The OECD (2012) has identified five key levers to be effective in encouraging quality in ECE:

- Policy Lever 1: Setting out quality goals and regulations
- Policy Lever 2: Designing and implementing curriculum and standards
- Policy Lever 3: Improving qualifications, training and working conditions
- Policy Lever 4: Engaging families and communities
- Policy Lever 5: Advancing data collection, research and monitoring

(OECD, 2012: 9)

Achieving quality ECE thus requires the engagement of a broad range of stakeholders – government, schools, teachers, families, communities and health care professionals. But challenges in co-ordinating and creating a holistic approach to ECE, which considers the diverse carers and educators that any one child may encounter – pre-school teacher, parent, nurse, home helpers (e.g. nanny or au pair), community health worker – results in the provision of health, nutrition, caretaking and early education as individual services (UNICEF, 2010). This diversity in background and qualifications in one country may also include positions that are seen as lacking a career path, good condition of service and professionalism.

In speaking about Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers specifically, Parker stated that ‘adding new qualifications to the system is not necessary to improve professionalism; we do need to take seriously initial teacher qualifications and training programmes’ (2011: 20). This distinction between professionalism and professionalisation (associated with qualifications) is an important one as it relates to achieving quality.

Health, creativity, motor skills, basic and communication skills, cognitive skills and socialisation are all important to successful early childhood and later development, and achieving them arguably requires an interdisciplinary approach to child development. The role of the well-trained, early childhood educator is essential, but so too are other roles in the community. E-learning and mobile learning show great promise, both in facilitating collaboration in course design and in providing training to diverse constituents that can transcend traditional geographic boundaries.

Reconceptualising curricula and early childhood education services

In recent years, we have seen a trend towards a learner-centred approach to ECD, influenced by theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky, with organisations such as UNESCO leading the call internationally to ‘ensure quality’ using ‘learner-centred’ pedagogy (UNESCO, 2011). This philosophy includes considering the learner’s background (social, cultural, linguistic, etc.) as well as individual creativity and personal interests as a strategy to develop their critical thinking skills and apply theory to practice.

Important to this development is social interaction – among children, and between a child and the teacher – meaning that the learning is co-created. This style of learning is also viewed as fostering principles of democracy (UNESCO, 2011), which ultimately prepares the very young for social participation at school and later in their wider communities. Interactive learning and co-creation of knowledge also happens at home between the child and family members. Researchers have found that parents’ own literacy skills and educational background influence children’s achievement at school, language skills and literacy; this can have either a positive or negative effect. Educational researchers and academics have expressed concern that our global focus on achievement, and the view that pre-kindergarten is for skill building, creates a strong divide between what happens at home and what happens at school. In reconceptualising curricula, we need to consider the fluidity between formal learning (in school), informal learning (at home) and non-formal learning (such as community outreach programmes), as well as the changing needs of the learner. It is also changing our definition of learner and teacher, as even the youngest of learners become teachers of their peers through this learner-centred process. We must not forget, however, that learning and development take place in context, which both determines and is influenced by the learning.

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