

Education Think Piece Series

UNICEF has commissioned 10 Think Pieces by leading research and practitioners to stimulate debate around significant educational challenges facing the Eastern and Southern Africa region. While the pieces are rooted in evidence, they are not research papers or evidence briefs, nor do they represent UNICEF policy. Rather, they are engaging pieces that aim to inspire fresh thinking to improve learning for all.

Quality and equitable access grounded in local knowledge: Bringing pre-primary education to scale

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A great deal of evidence demonstrates the significant effects that quality pre-primary education can have on a child's cognitive, social and emotional development, growth, school readiness and future economic potential. However, only 42 per cent of children in sub-Saharan Africa participate in any organized pre-primary education before the typical enrolment age for grade one. Such education is often only available to wealthier children, and is not of consistent quality,¹ nor does it incorporate the local knowledge of learning processes that pre-school children should be exposed to before commencement of formal schooling.² We believe that the focus of pre-primary education must go beyond access to include quality and equitable access in terms of focus, processes, stakeholder involvement and integration of local knowledge into quality programming. It is a mistake to prioritize access alone: both quality and equitable access matter.

This Think Piece on pre-primary education, while acknowledging the need to increase access for children in vulnerable situations, also aims to elaborate on what constitutes quality pre-primary education. We will ask why focusing on quality and equitable access is imperative in Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) and why it unfortunately does not happen. And we will explore what is the implication of the increased focus on access on the provision of quality pre-primary education, as evidenced in a global indicator for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 4.2. For example, we know that programmes that emphasize access first, with the idea that quality will come later, do not work and further perpetuate inequities. The UWEZO (2010) report, while not specific to pre-primary education, indicated that increasing access without incorporating quality considerations, especially in Kenya's public primary schools, perpetuated inequities between pupils from poor and rich households, led to disappointing levels of learning in public schools and further increased the dominance of private over public schools.

¹ UNESCO, Global education monitoring report 2017/18, 2017.

² Wadende, Oburu, Morara, African indigenous care-giving practices, Stimulating early childhood: development and education in Kenya, South African Journal of Childhood Education 6(2), a446, 2016.

The result of not simultaneously focusing on both access and quality has been substantial investment in national pre-primary programming that may have a wide reach but is largely ineffective.³ And right now, most countries in the region have a patchwork of multilateral NGO and for-profit providers focusing mainly on increasing access but inadvertently leaving out most children (especially those in lower-income households) with no availability of any pre-primary, let alone quality pre-primary education. These foreign or for-profit entities also tend to operate outside of government control, leading to very inconsistent access, oversight and quality.

What is quality pre-primary education?

We believe the discussion must be around how to provide access to quality pre-primary education, with access and quality considered simultaneously. But what does quality and equitable pre-primary education look like? While there is no one single definition of quality nor equity especially in the context of pre-primary education, at minimum quality education must meet stakeholder expectations and comprise a child-friendly and rights-based environment where children's developmental and learning needs are effectively supported.

The stakeholders are varied but have a common interest in ensuring that all children (including the vulnerable and marginalized), from conception to age of school entry achieve their full developmental potential. They include caregivers, communities, government agencies, civil society and Non-Governmental organizations. For example, UNICEF's Early Childhood Development Framework calls for "safe, stimulating and nurturing learning environments".⁴ And UNICEF's guidance on the provision of a rights-based educational environment focuses on nurturing care and distribution of educational opportunities to all children to benefit from quality education irrespective of their gender, wealth status and ethnicity. The framework also adopts multi-sectoral intervention packages that incorporate stakeholders' engagements in the provision of early learning, caregiving and child protection.

For the purpose of this Think Piece, we will define quality pre-primary education in terms of resource availability, organization and management of learning processes, and the extent to which the early childhood and education programmes currently offered meet children's developmental needs as well as meet the expectations and requirements of stakeholders. Another broad issue for quality is a competent workforce with proper/standardized qualifications, supply and retention of qualified teachers, and system capacity to train and mentor these teachers, and assuring quality across providers.

Emphasis on equitable quality pre-primary education should thus be placed on the provision of an educational environment that is participatory, holistic, incremental (e.g. builds on skills already acquired at home), relevant (home learning is interrelated to institutionalized school learning), welcoming, gender sensitive, healthy, safe and protective. In addition, provision of equitable quality education requires integration of school preparation skills with life acquisition skills, creates room for leveraging of communal knowledge in the generation of expected learning outcomes, treats all children with respect; and actively supports children's play-based learning needs and human rights.⁵ For example, developers of pre-primary education programmes need to integrate school preparation skills with local knowledge about life skills acquisition, and incorporate interrelated aspects of home and institutionalized school learning and cultural precepts regarding all forms of learning as preparation for life. An example of this is the Madrasa experience in Kenya where religious learning and formal schooling were incorporated into early childhood education programmes.

Yet the provision of such an environment has proven challenging for most countries in ESA. Often when pre-primary education is offered, it is delivered like education for older children, with children spending the school day sitting still and receiving rote instruction. We know that children learn best through play and hands-on experiences, with guidance from a caring adult.⁶ Yet a study in Kenya, Uganda and Zanzibar found that children had very limited access to materials that supported imaginative and free-choice play.⁷ Overall, pre-primary education has been poorly implemented in ESA.

³ van der Berg et al., The impact of the introduction of Grade R on learning outcomes. Stellenbosch, South Africa: University of Stellenbosch, 2013.

⁴ UNICEF, Program guidance for early childhood development. New York, 2017a.

⁵ UNICEF, A human rights-based approach to education for all. New York, 2007.

⁶ Maulik & Darmstadt, Community-based interventions to optimize early childhood development in low resource settings. *Journal of Perinatology*, 29(8), 531–42, 2009

⁷ Dirks et al., Preschool quality and child outcomes in East Africa. Presentation at the biennial meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development, Austin, TX, April 2017

Why is high quality pre-primary education important?

There is substantial evidence from low- and middle-income countries that low-quality early childhood education has limited or even negative effects on children's development.⁸ Poor quality early care and education environments can elevate children's stress responses in ways that inhibit the acquisition of higher-order cognitive and social skills.⁹ In contrast, in quality programming where children can develop supportive and trusting relationships with teachers, they typically have lower and better-regulated levels of stress hormones.¹⁰ Having a positive and responsive caregiver also buffers the effects of adversity and fosters young children's positive development and learning.¹¹ In low- and middle-income country contexts, there is also evidence that a quality pre-primary education has a significant impact on developmental skills important to primary grade success and helps to ensure on-time enrolment in primary school.¹² This is particularly important for the most vulnerable and excluded children.



Why is quality pre-primary education that incorporates local knowledge lacking in ESA?

There are multiple reasons why there are both access and quality issues with pre-primary education in ESA.

1. The region has widespread misconceptions and erroneous belief systems about quality pre-primary education.

There is a lack of experience with quality pre-primary education among educators and parents alike. They may believe that they are doing the right thing by replicating the kind of education they know, resulting in developmentally inappropriate models that emphasize rote learning.

2. Early childhood is undervalued as a critical period of development.

There are unhelpful attitudes and belief systems that affect how pre-primary education is viewed in the ESA region. For example, early childhood is not often viewed or understood as a period of development where children are autonomous learners and active participants in their learning. In addition, early childhood education is frequently perceived as a female-dominated, non-professional enterprise associated more with basic caregiving than with learning. This makes pre-primary peripheral and a low priority when it comes to funding, teacher recruitment, training and deployment. This situation may be further compounded by the variation between local practices at the grassroots level that facilitate child socialization and learning and current perceptions of pre-primary education as a Western pedagogical practice. For example, amongst the Turkana pastoralist community of Northern Kenya, the limited uptake of pre-primary education has been linked to the inability to ground early childhood development (ECD) programmes and services within local or cultural conceptions of learning, values and belief systems.¹³ Social mobilization components of ECD policies and programmes may address some of these attitudes.¹⁴

⁸ Rao et al., Early childhood development and cognitive development in developing countries: A rigorous literature review. London: Department for International Development, 2014; Rosero & Oosterbeek, Trade-offs between different early childhood interventions: Evidence from Ecuador. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam and Tinbergen Institute, 2011.

⁹ D'Angiulli & Schiblib, How neuroendocrinology can contribute to early childhood education and care: Cortisol as a supplementary indicator of quality. Quarterly Review of Comparative Education, 46, 281–299, 2016.

¹⁰ Lisonbee, Mize, Payne, & Granger, Children's cortisol and the quality of teacher-child relationships in child care. Child Development, 79, 1818–1832, 2008.

¹¹ Jones & Boufard, Social and emotional learning in schools: From programs to strategies. Social Policy Report, 26, 1–33, 2012; Egeland, Risk and resilience in infants and young children. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association. Chicago, 1997.

¹² Young, State of early child development research, practice, and policy for most vulnerable children: A global perspective. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 158, 11–23, 2017.

¹³ Ng'asike, African early childhood development curriculum and pedagogy for Turkana nomadic pastoralist communities of Kenya. In R. Serpell & K. Marfo (Eds.), Child development in Africa: Views from inside. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 146, 43–60, 2014.

¹⁴ Yoshikawa et al., Achieving high quality early childhood development program and policies at national scale: Directions for research in global contexts. Social Policy Report of the Society for Research in Child Development, 31(1), 1–31, 2018.

3. Focusing on access alone is short sighted and compromises quality.

A focus on the quality of pre-primary education in national policy and donor investment is still very limited. The long-term payoff of quality pre-primary education can be incompatible with the short-term interests of policy makers as well as funding cycles of international donors. If pre-primary education is considered, investments often focus exclusively on access as this can be demonstrated relatively quickly. Especially when developing low-cost models of pre-primary education to achieve access, inadequate attention to quality may create equity issues where the most marginalized populations experience the lowest levels of quality in pre-primary education. Although some evidence suggests that attendance at such programmes may still benefit children's development, positive effects are smaller than when greater investments in quality are implemented.¹⁵ It may be important to consider an approach in which investments in quality are targeted first to the most marginalized populations.

4. Early learning and pre-primary education gets lost in fragmented systems.

Early learning and pre-primary education may be de-emphasized when multiple stakeholders dominate the early childhood care and development space. An uncoordinated agenda can lead to sectors such as nutrition, health, education, social protection and child protection having their own priorities. The new Nurturing Care Framework may benefit from promoting further integration of early learning and education into parenting or home-based caring techniques, especially in the second 1,000 days.¹⁶

5. There is a lack of accountability for the provision of quality and equity in pre-primary education across public and private sectors.

Countries rely upon a mixed economy of providers, and there is poor regulatory oversight. Insufficient human and financial resource can lead to governments relying on non-state and private organizations for pre-primary provision. This can lead to inconsistent access and quality, and a tendency to rely upon foreign models rather than context-driven approaches that value and leverage the needs and assets of the country, region or community.¹⁷ This reliance on foreign actors also disempowers governments from providing adequate oversight to ensure quality, and does not encourage their attention to and investment in their own systems.

Quality pre-primary education: Some promising approaches

To be scalable and sustainable, quality pre-primary education models must address the very significant and pervasive issue of insufficient human resources at a cost that is affordable for governments. Fortunately, there are some promising approaches that address these challenges:

1. Training local community members (usually women with a secondary school diploma) to serve as pre-primary teachers. Examples of this include, CONAFE,¹⁸ BRAC,¹⁹ Hippocampus,²⁰ and Save the Children's Emergent Literacy and Math.²¹ These models reach into underserved communities, where teachers with formal professional qualifications typically do not wish to work. These pre-primary teachers become very respected within their communities and serve as a community resource for child development.



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¹⁵ Rao et al., Early childhood development and cognitive development in developing countries: A rigorous literature review. London: Department for International Development, 2012.

¹⁶ WHO and UNICEF, Nurturing Care Framework, Geneva: WHO, 2018, available from http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/child/nurturing-care-framework/en/

¹⁷ Dubeck et al., Designing a program of teacher professional development to support beginning reading acquisition in coastal Kenya. International Journal of Educational Development, 41, 88-96, 2015.

¹⁸ <https://www.gob.mx/conafe>

¹⁹ <http://www.brac.net/education-programme/item/760-brac-pre-primary-schools-bpps>

²⁰ <http://hlc.hippocampus.in/>

²¹ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/elm-emergent-literacy-and-math-toolkit>

2. Accelerated school readiness programmes train and incentivize existing grade one teachers or community volunteers to provide a school readiness short course during the summer months when the classrooms are otherwise empty.²²
3. “Hub” based models of pre-primary education where a high quality village becomes a model and a resource for surrounding villages. For example, the Kidogo model used in Kenya establishes quality ECD centres that serve as “best practice” models for a community, providing training, resources and mentoring for local women who then start their own centres. While this is a for-profit enterprise, the model itself demonstrates how quality ECD programming can be scaled.²³
4. In-service professional development on pre-primary for teachers, head teachers and officers at district and regional levels can be supported with innovative methods such as telephone-enabled mentoring and coaching. We are not aware of this model being used yet to support pre-primary teachers in the region, but it has been very successful in sub-Saharan Africa to support agriculture.²⁴
5. Developing a mechanism for language-minority, indigenous and/or remote populations to propose culturally based approaches to quality indicators and implementation within a national quality standards system.²⁵ For example among the Turkana pastoralist groups of Northern Kenya, where relevant learning is geared towards acquisition of life skills, integration of school preparation skills with life skills acquisition in early childhood education is one such mechanism.
6. Inclusive approaches to ECD policy development and implementation that incorporate social mobilization (e.g. utilizing local networks and systems such as women co-operatives as entry points for change), communications and media campaigns, and recruitment of a diversity of subnational and municipal, not just national, political leaders.²⁶ Diversity of leadership at all levels can help ensure that approaches to providing quality pre-primary education are appropriate and feasible for all of a country’s populations (not just the majority).



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7. Approaches to measurement that centrally capture aspects of ECD systems functioning, programme-level process quality and culturally grounded measures of child development, in order to inform programmes and systems improvement. Process quality refers to the quality of teacher-child interactions and pedagogy, rather than infrastructure or staff formal qualifications. Building the capacity of researchers from these countries to engage in such measurement work is critical and is being carried out by the African Early Childhood Network (AFECN) and the New York University based Education Quality and Learning for All (EQUAL) Network for SDG 4’s ESA section.²⁷
8. Investing in systems development. A comprehensive approach to quality ECD encompasses all the above approaches in governance and finance. These include attention to community and stakeholder involvement in quality improvement; workforce development systems; data systems incorporating quality formative and summative learning assessments; robust financial systems to track expenditures; and links across municipal, subnational and national level that are not simply about compliance but about quality improvement.²⁸

²² <http://www.equip-t.org/>

²³ <https://www.kidogo.co/>

²⁴ Centre for Learning Resources, Formative evaluation of a large-scale capacity-building intervention to integrate care and stimulation content into the Mitani Programme. Chattisgarh, India: UNICEF, 2017.

²⁵ Motta & Yoshikawa, Challenges of Sustainable Development Goal 4 for a culturally diverse world: Infusing culture in ECD policy in Colombia’s “Modalidad Propia.” In S. Verma & A. Petersen (Eds.), *Developmental science and the 2015-2030 Sustainable Development Goals*. New York: Springer, in press.

²⁶ Vargas-Barón, *Policies on Early Childhood Care and Education: Their evolution and some impacts*. Paris: UNESCO, 2015.

²⁷ Oburu & Yoshikawa, Potential roles of multiple stakeholder partnerships in addressing conceptual and implementation challenges of Sustainable Development Goal 4. In S. Verma & A. Petersen (Eds.), *Developmental science and the 2015-2030 Sustainable Development Goals*. New York: Springer, in press.

²⁸ Yoshikawa et al., Achieving high quality early childhood development program and policies at national scale: Directions for research in global contexts. *Social Policy Report of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 31(1), 1-31, 2018.

How can we ensure quality pre-primary for all?

There is a need to acknowledge that limited attention to pre-primary education is a real problem, with real consequences for excluded children who already face significant risks for poor educational outcomes.

So, what can we do?

First, policymakers and other stakeholders will not change the status quo without a good reason to do so. There are roles for UNICEF education specialists and other international partners to engage in information-sharing and advocacy with those who have the power to drive system-level change – whether they are politicians, educators, families, the public, or all the above – at subnational, national, and regional levels. The ultimate purpose is to reach a critical mass of demand for quality pre-primary education, so that once established, it cannot be easily taken away when the political winds change direction.

Second, beliefs and practices that perpetuate the low status of pre-primary education and educators should be challenged, both at the level of policymakers and among parents and the general public. What is required are creative solutions and innovative approaches aimed at understanding reasons for, and how to deal with, misinformation and inherent belief systems specific to the early childhood period. These approaches could include addressing belief systems that assume a lower status for women and children, and increasing male involvement in early care and education to challenge gender stereotypes. Challenging beliefs that perpetuate the low status of pre-primary education may require creative development of locally relevant demand-side interventions.²⁹ For example, social mobilization campaigns have been successful in Latin America to raise awareness of national ECD programmes and policies.³⁰

Third, pre-primary education must become embedded in larger systems if it is to receive the oversight, funding, and other resources required to reach all children. Only a handful of countries in the region have any system of standards or oversight to ensure the quality of pre-primary education. System support for pre-primary education requires national quality standards, leadership and data systems; local level training and monitoring systems to ensure programme quality; and subnational governance that can effectively coordinate between the national and local levels.³¹

And fourth, the region needs substantial and long-term investment from governments and donors to address the current constraints to providing universally-available, quality pre-primary education in the region. There is a need to identify and adapt effective models that are feasible within the available (or potentially available) human resources, infrastructure, and material resources – including within the context of low-resource or marginalized communities. Adaptation should also be responsive to the needs, values, and assets of children, families, communities, and educators. The process of implementing at scale also requires the support of civil society organizations and researchers, along with partnerships with the public sector and policy makers. Clearly, there is a need for up-front and ongoing investment in capacity building for measurement and evaluation purposes. Additionally, we need to invest in identification of best practices, adaptation to work at scale, and development of the necessary support systems to manage and sustain a quality pre-primary system.

²⁹ UNICEF, Early moments matter for every child. New York, 2017b.

³⁰ Government of Colombia, *De Cero a Siempre: Atención integral a la primera infancia (from Zero to Always: Integrated Care in Early Childhood)*, 2017.

³¹ Yoshikawa et al., Achieving high quality early childhood development program and policies at national scale: Directions for research in global contexts. *Social Policy Report of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 31(1), 1-31, 2018.

In Conclusion

There is a strong need for quality, universally-available pre-primary education in ESA. The desire for “quick wins” among governments as well as donor organizations perpetuates a focus on access, with easily-cited enrolment figures. The current focus on access alone is insufficient, and heightens the risk that large investments will continually be made in programming that does not benefit children. The tendency of donors to focus on the next exciting innovation also leaves little funding for bringing what works to scale.³²

Donors and partners to governments can best help countries improve their children’s equitable access to quality pre-primary by focusing on building enabling environments and capacity (rather than continuing to invest directly in programming). Establishing quality, sustainable pre-primary education systems requires societal level changes in beliefs and practices that perpetuate the low status of pre-primary education and educators, longer-term investment, and a willingness to abandon quick wins in favour of longer-term gain. Children will not have quality pre-primary education on a large scale without this shift in priorities, combined with investment in the development of strong systems to provide quality pre-primary education for all.



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³² Robinson & Winthrop, Millions learning: Scaling up quality education in developing countries. Washington, DC: Brookings, 2017.



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Further reading

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List of Acronyms

AFECN	African Early Childhood Network
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ESA	Eastern and Southern Africa
EQUAL	Education Quality and Learning for All
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal



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