



A WORLD READY TO LEARN:

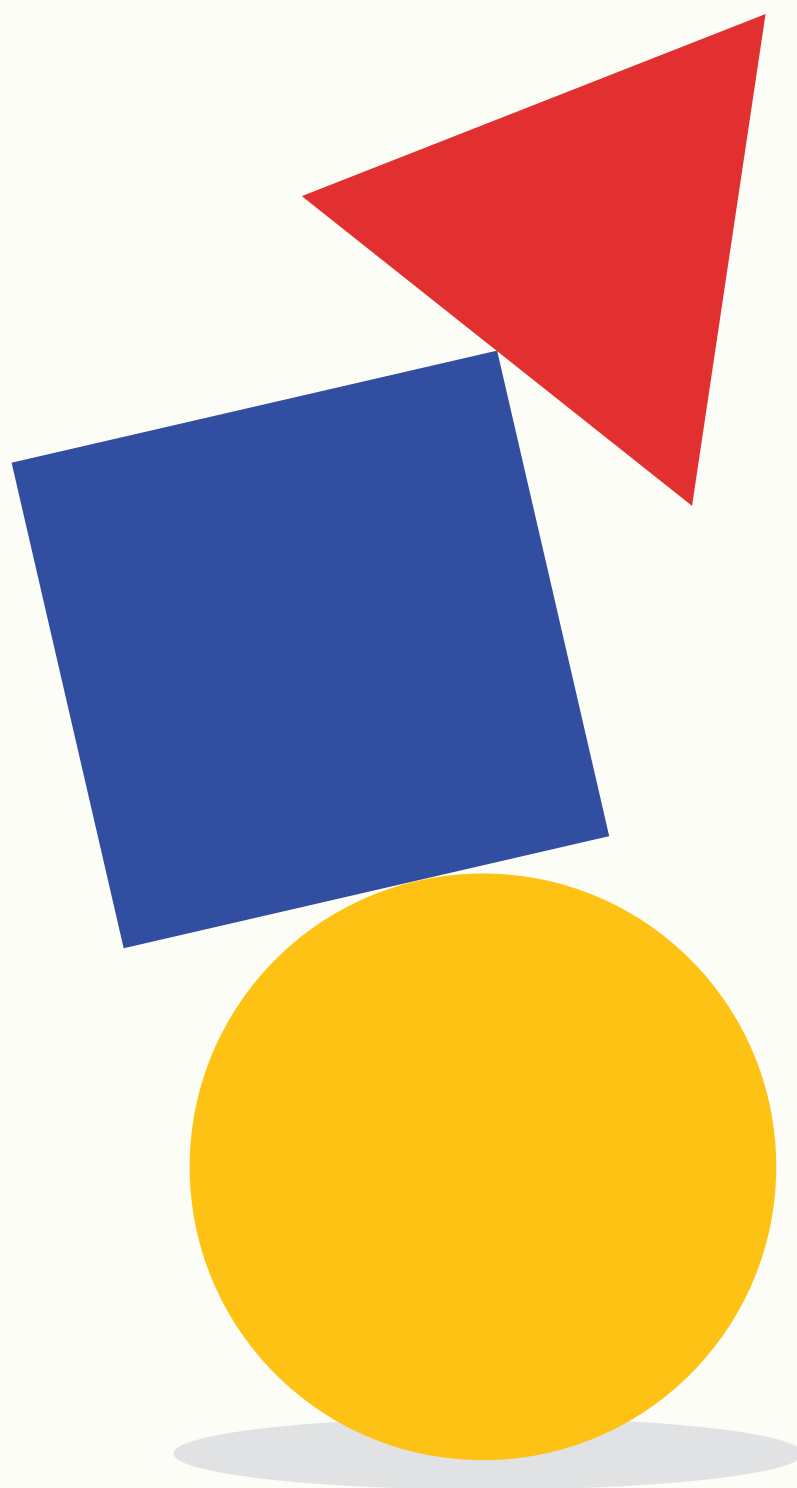
Prioritizing quality
early childhood
education

ADVOCACY BRIEF



A WORLD READY TO LEARN

Advocacy brief



2030

The Sustainable Development Goals have issued the world a bold challenge: provide all children with quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education by 2030. The reasons for this aspiration are clear – a solid body of evidence shows that the foundations for learning are largely built in the early years of life, before a child ever crosses the threshold of a primary school. Children who fall behind in these early years often never catch up with their peers, perpetuating a cycle of underachievement and high dropout rates that continues to harm vulnerable young people.¹



175 million

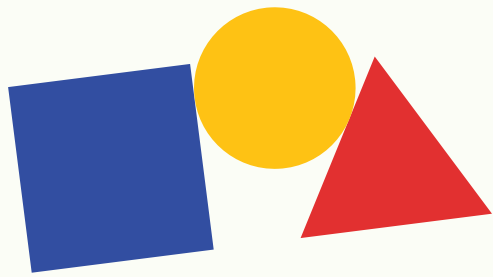
Yet despite the proven and lifelong benefits of pre-primary education, **half of the pre-primary school-age children in the world today** – that is, at least 175 million children – are not enrolled during these vital years.²



78%

More drastically, in low-income countries, 78 per cent are not enrolled in pre-primary education.³ This represents one of the greatest missed opportunities to cultivate the world's human capital and help children reach their potential.

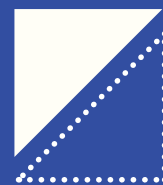
Providing universal access to pre-primary education in low- and lower-middle-income countries by 2030 requires a practical yet bold approach. Many countries are still near the start of their journeys; this is not a 'last mile' challenge. Countries should pursue smart, proven strategies that can help stakeholders embark on the path towards quality universal pre-primary education while remaining sensitive to present realities. By setting priorities and navigating trade-offs, it is possible to build education systems that will put millions of children today on the path to fulfilling their potential.



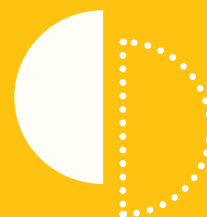
Balancing trade-offs

This brief addresses three of the toughest questions ministries of education and finance are likely to face when considering strategies to bolster their pre-primary education programmes:

1.
**Investing in pre-primary
education vs. other levels
of education.**



2.
**Growing access vs.
improving quality.**



3.
**Prioritizing expansion
vs. emphasizing equity.**



**Investing in
pre-primary
education**

**v
s**

**Other levels
of education**

In an ideal world, governments would fully fund all components of the education sector.

But budgetary realities can force decision makers to prioritize different parts of the system. In this negotiation, pre-primary education too often loses out. There is undoubtedly an urgent need to increase access to quality primary, secondary and tertiary education. However, the evidence demonstrating high returns on investment in pre-primary education is equally compelling. Students equipped with a quality early childhood education are better prepared to reach higher levels of education and to prosper once they enter the workforce.

Quality education during the early years sets children up for success throughout their education. Numerous country-level studies have shown that students who complete pre-primary school are less likely to repeat grades⁴ and more likely to complete primary and secondary school.⁵⁻⁷

Such students are also much more likely to be literate and numerate, as well as more socially and emotionally developed.⁸⁻¹⁰ Together, this evidence suggests that quality pre-primary education will ultimately help each country meet its goals for primary, secondary and higher education.

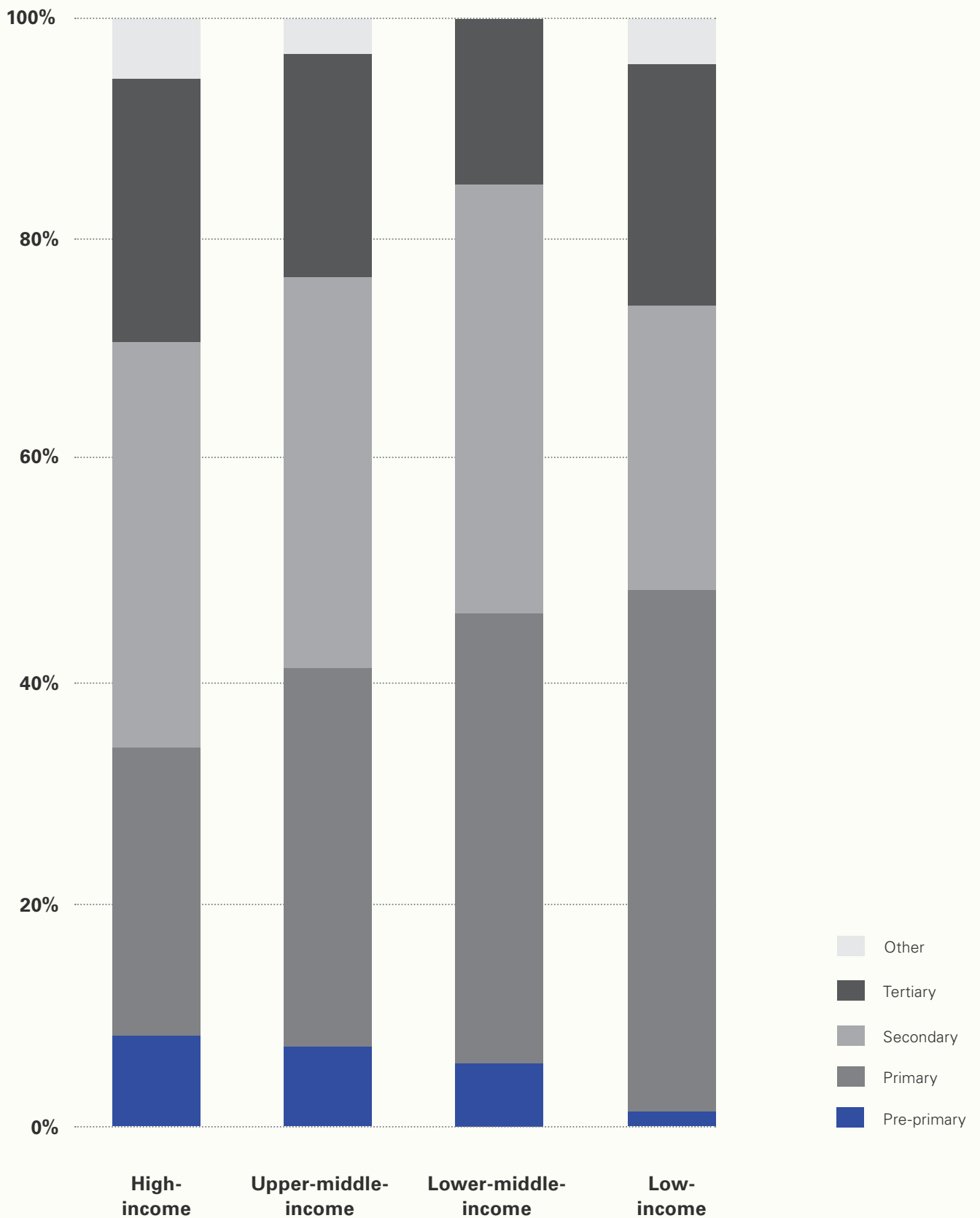
Successful students move more efficiently through the education system, meaning that investing in educational opportunities during the early years of a child's life could ultimately save money during later stages of their education down the road. In Sierra Leone, for example, where just a third of 4-year-olds are enrolled in pre-primary education, a shocking 18 per cent of students repeat first grade.¹¹ By reducing the number of students who repeat grades, require individualized attention or drop out, a strong pre-primary system will free up funds that can be spread throughout the system in the future.

The benefits of a quality pre-primary education extend beyond formal attainment of educational qualifications; they can also support a country's goals for economic growth. Early childhood education helps children grow into productive adults by providing a foundation for the skills that the modern job market demands, including critical thinking, collaboration, communication, negotiation, self-management, resilience and creativity.^{12,13} One dollar invested in quality early childhood education and affiliated services for disadvantaged children can return an additional 10 cents every year throughout that child's lifetime.¹⁴

Governments' current budgetary priorities fail to reflect the importance of pre-primary education. Pre-primary education is deeply underfunded relative to other education levels, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. While in most high-income countries, education spending per child of pre-primary age (enrolled and not enrolled) is roughly half of the spending per child of primary and secondary education age, the situation is far different in low-income countries.

The average low-income country spends about 125 times more per child (enrolled and unenrolled) on primary education than on pre-primary education, and over 70 times more on lower and upper secondary education.¹⁵ In fact, pre-primary education spending amounts to just 2 per cent of the education budget – well below the 8 per cent and 9 per cent spent by the average upper-middle- and high-income countries, respectively (Figure 1).¹⁶

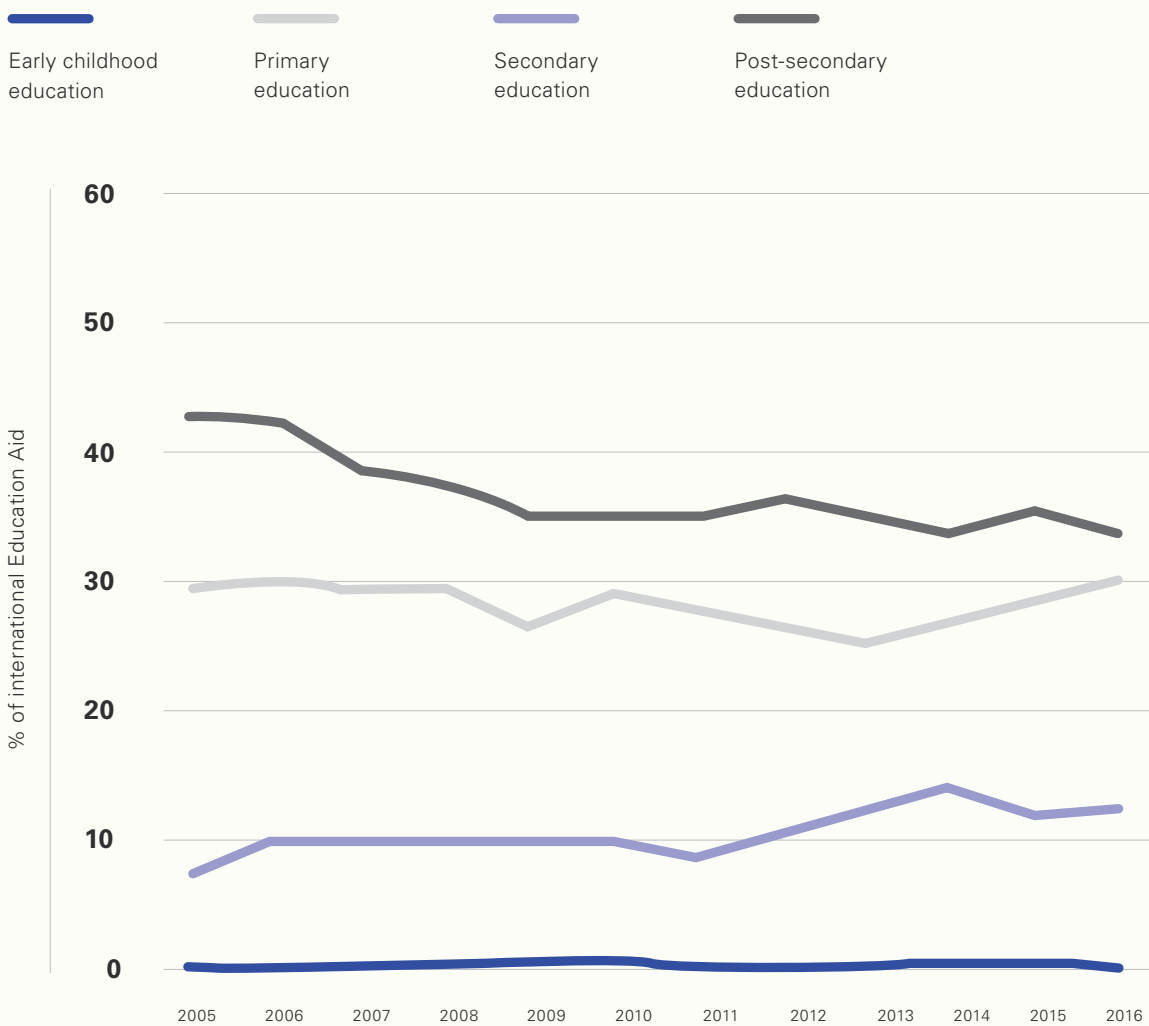
Fig. 1
Distribution of government expenditure on education across subsectors, by income level



Source: Computations by UNICEF, based on data from the UIS global database, 2018.

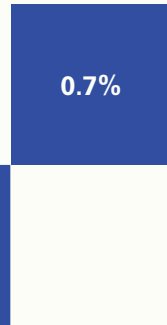
Early childhood education is also not a demonstrated priority for international donors, despite its well-known benefits. Since 2005, while aid to secondary education has nearly doubled, aid for pre-primary education has remained stagnant (Figure 2). In 2015 alone, donors gave 26 times more aid in scholarships for students to study abroad than they gave to the entire pre-primary education subsector.¹⁷ In 2016, early childhood education received just 0.7 per cent of international education aid.¹⁸

Fig. 2
Percentage of international education aid to different levels of education, between 2005 and 2016

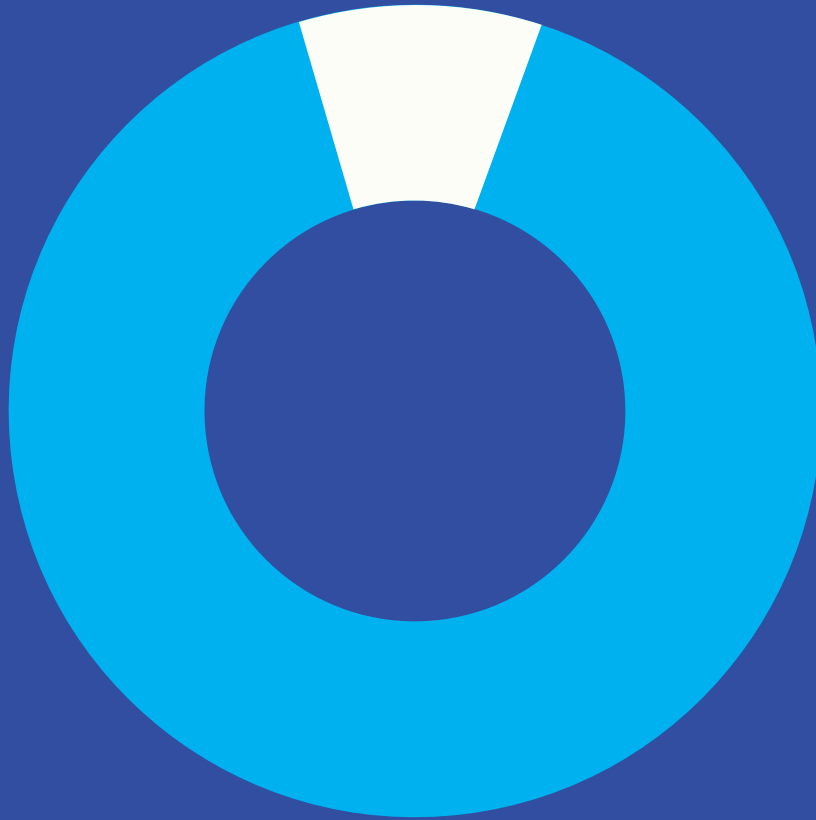


Source: Computations by UNICEF, using OECD Creditor Reporting System data (2018) on official development assistance disbursements to levels of education; international aid to other basic education and unspecified level of education are not included.

In 2016, early childhood education received just 0.7 per cent of international education aid.



99.3%



This lopsided state of affairs must be reversed. Based on simulated paths to universality,

UNICEF recommends that countries devote at least 10 per cent of their total education budget to pre-primary education.

Of course, scaling government budgets up to this level takes time, and for many low-income countries this will happen progressively.



UNICEF therefore encourages donors to lead by example by allocating at least 10 per cent of their education aid to pre-primary education, catalysing and complementing public resources.

Until every child in every country around the world is reaping the benefits of quality early childhood education, there is clearly reason aplenty to prioritize investment in this historically underfunded subsector.





**Growing
access**

v s

**Improving
quality**

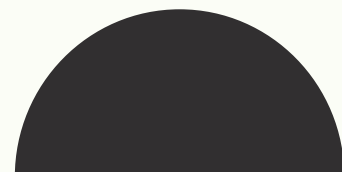
When governments assess their investment in pre-primary education, an important question that arises is the trade-off between high-quality early childhood education and broad access.

Attending a pre-primary programme is of limited value to a child unless that programme is of a sufficiently high standard. But efforts to develop a high-quality pre-primary system are often stymied by the realities on the ground: a lack of skilled professional teachers, age-appropriate curricula and mechanisms for quality assurance.

It is widely recognized that skilled teachers are key to providing a quality pre-primary experience.¹⁹ However, it is unrealistic to simply require that teachers have a high-level educational qualification. Uganda, for example, requires pre-primary teachers to have completed high school. But in order to deliver universal early childhood education, 80 per cent of its lower secondary school graduates would have to become pre-primary teachers given how few young Ugandans currently graduate each year.²⁰ Even in countries where there are sufficient graduates to meet demand, attracting such individuals to the pre-primary level could be prohibitively expensive. Today, just half of pre-primary teachers in low-income countries are trained.²¹



Today, just half of pre-primary teachers in low-income countries are trained.



With these realities in mind, UNICEF recommends that countries pursue an interim strategy of recruiting teachers who initially may lack academic qualifications or formal training but possess the nurturing qualities required to provide a positive learning experience for children.

At the same time, all pre-primary educators (including those outside the public sector) should be given access to intensive teacher training and support mechanisms. Providing ongoing professional development and relevant on-the-job training more effectively supports children's learning and is ultimately less expensive than hiring teachers with high academic qualifications.^{22,23}



This sort of interim strategy ensures that education professionals will become increasingly skilled over time as a result of both formal training and experience on the job. This means that, in the long run, the bar for the credentials required of teachers entering the system can be raised. Furthermore, this approach enables the workforce to grow along with enrolment numbers, avoiding the possibility of unacceptably high pupil-teacher ratios imposed by strict limits on who is qualified to teach.



This is crucial because, to achieve universal pre-primary education by 2030, low- and lower-middle-income countries will need four times more pre-primary teachers than they have today – that is, they must add over 8 million additional pre-primary teachers to their workforce.²⁴

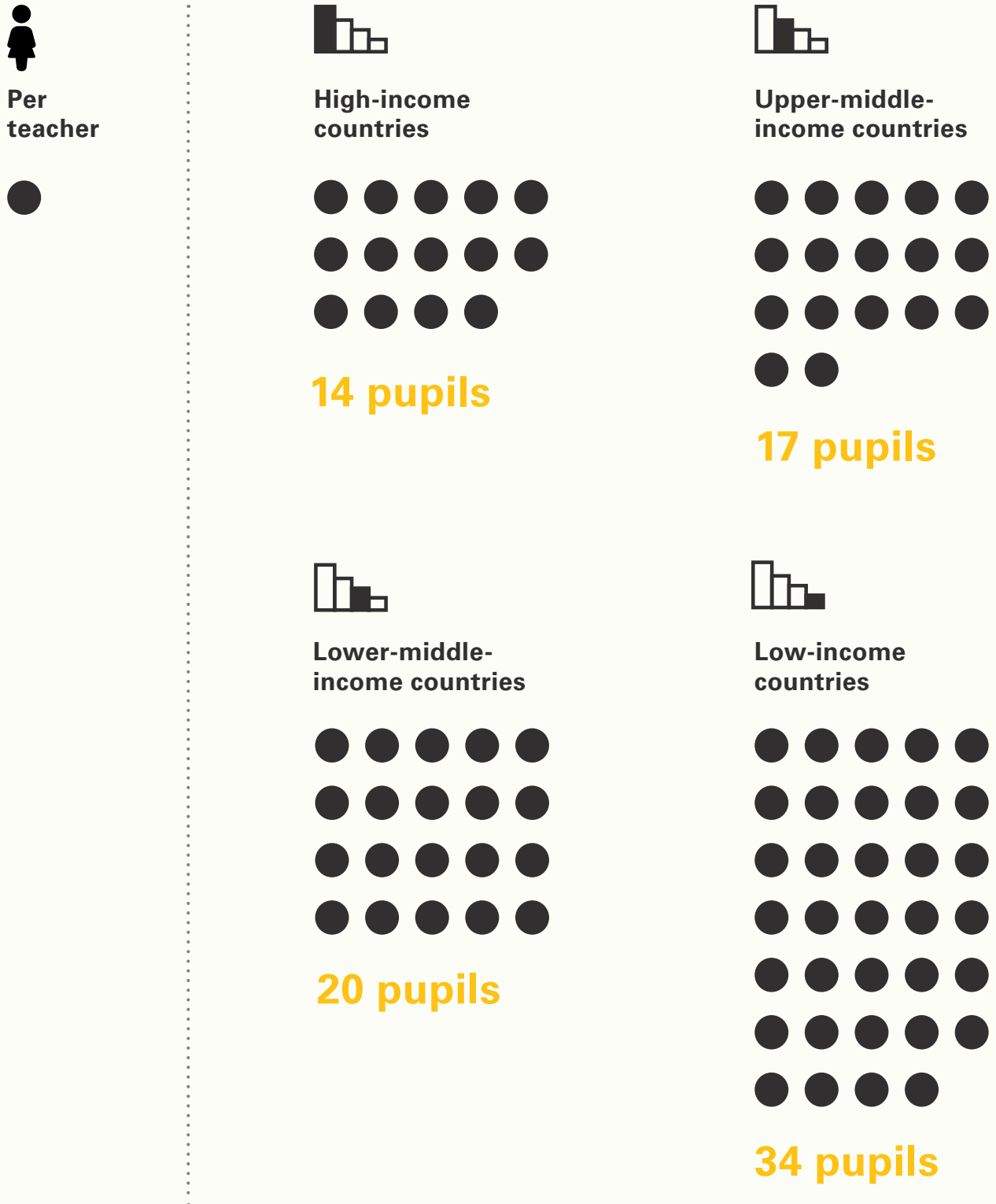
20:1

UNICEF recommends that countries progressively aim for a pupil-teacher ratio of no more than 20 children per teacher at the pre-primary level.

While lower pupil-teacher ratios are always better, the progress made in lower-middle-income countries demonstrates that 20:1 is an achievable target for low-income countries.²⁵ Progress towards this goal should of course occur at a practicable pace as sufficient numbers of interim teachers are hired.



Fig. 3
Pupil-teacher ratio,
by country income level in 2017





Teachers, however, are just one component of quality pre-primary education systems. To ensure that funds are available for investments in quality assurance and better implementation,

UNICEF recommends that 25 per cent of recurrent pre-primary expenditures be reserved for non-salary costs, like learning and teaching materials, teacher training, curriculum development and quality assurance mechanisms.²⁶

To ensure that pre-primary schools are child-centred, stimulating and exploratory environments for play and learning, government should employ pre-primary experts to develop appropriate curricula. The challenges of curriculum development for early childhood education are markedly different than those of primary or secondary education; pre-primary education should never be viewed as a downward extension of primary school. Finding experienced pre-primary professionals will often mean leveraging technical expertise from outside the public sector.



Furthermore, UNICEF recommends that each ministry of education should develop a coherent framework for monitoring the quality of pre-primary programmes across both public and non-public providers.

Ministries must set clear quality goals and standards, as well as regulatory procedures and mechanisms such as inspections, regular surveys and feedback loops. Government at all levels should invest in the resources and capacity to implement a quality assurance framework to this effect, including sufficient numbers of trained evaluators and inspectors.

None of this can be accomplished if all resources are solely focused on expanding access as rapidly as possible. Countries should instead set moderate goals during the early stages of expanding pre-primary access that allow for necessary investments in quality at the same time.

It is only by investing in quality as the system grows – not before or after – that stakeholders can find a balance between expanding access and maintaining quality.



**Prioritizing
expansion**

v s

**Emphasizing
equity**

When a country's chief goal is to expand the pre-primary education system as quickly as possible, decision makers are often tempted to begin by providing services to the children who are easiest to reach.

This usually means children from wealthier households – that is, children who already have advantages relative to their less affluent peers.

Ample evidence suggests that pre-primary education benefits children from low-income families the most.²⁷⁻²⁹ For example, the poorest children who participated in a pre-primary programme in Ethiopia made almost double the gains in language and literacy compared to their better-off peers.³⁰

A look at the status quo in Figure 4 reveals that access to early childhood education is currently highly unequal in almost every country, with attendance rates of children in the richest quintile much higher than those of the poor. In low-income countries, children from wealthier households are eight times more likely to attend early education programmes than their peers from the poorest quintile.³¹

Furthermore, for countries with low levels of access (Figure 4 at the top of the graph), the gap between the richest and poorest tends to worsen as more and more children enrol. Without a concerted effort to target the poorest, simply expanding pre-primary access alone benefits the rich before it benefits the poor.



Fig. 4
Percentage of
children attending
early childhood
education
programmes, by
wealth quintile in
select countries

Source: Computations by UNICEF, based on available data from UNICEF MICS global databases, 2010–2016.

In low-income countries, children from wealthier households are **eight times more likely to attend early education programmes than their peers from the poorest quintile.**



UNICEF strongly recommends that countries put in place policies that prioritize the poorest and hardest to reach at the start of the road to universality, not at the end. These policies should plan to reach all children while explicitly ensuring that poorer and harder to reach children are not the last to benefit.

It is easy for government programmes to end up perpetuating inequality when a conscious effort is not made to prioritize the most vulnerable populations. Because pre-primary education holds such great potential to improve a child's trajectory, inequitable access will only widen the gap between the richest and the poorest even further.

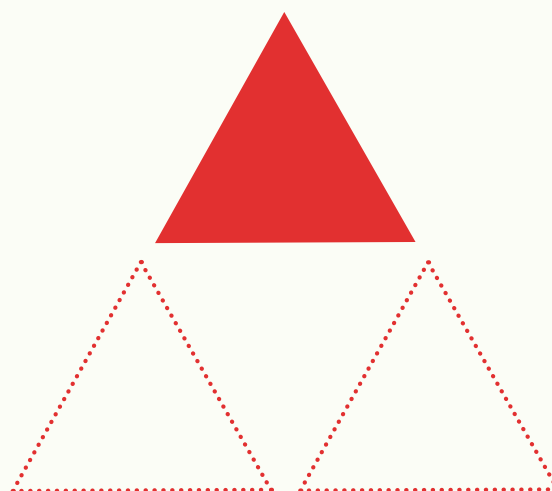
Fee structures are key to ensuring equitable access. Globally, low- and lower-middle-income countries with a policy in place for free and compulsory pre-primary education report gross enrolment ratios that are 37 percentage points higher than countries with no such policies.³² When the United Republic of Tanzania expanded compulsory basic education to include one year of free pre-primary education, the gross enrolment ratio jumped from 32 per cent in 2015 to 45 per cent in 2016 as the policy came into effect.³³



For these reasons, UNICEF encourages governments to make public pre-primary education programmes free. Where free pre-primary education is financially unfeasible, countries should stimulate non-state financing to ensure that money is not a barrier to access for disadvantaged families.

Countries should embrace a progressive, universalist approach in which free services are provided to the neediest first and then expanded to those who are better off as it becomes financially feasible. Where fees are needed, an effort should be made to reduce or remove the financial burden for the poorest families first. This is especially important because so many of the existing options for pre-primary education are fee-based private schools, which are unavailable to the poor. In low-income countries, 33 per cent of pre-primary students are enrolled with private providers, which is well above the rate of private provision at other education levels.³⁴





In countries affected by emergencies, only 1 in 3 children is enrolled in pre-primary education.

Income is not the only dimension across which equitable access must be pursued. Ethnicity, language, geographic location, gender, disability and refugee/migrant/internally displaced status can all render some children more vulnerable than others. In Thailand, for example, equity has been achieved across wealth quintiles, but a 15.3 percentage point difference persists between ethnic Thai and non-ethnic Thai children, as measured by the language spoken by the head of household.³⁵ And in countries affected by emergencies, only one in three children is enrolled in pre-primary education.³⁶

While outreach to vulnerable populations must of course be context-specific, there are plenty of examples of creative solutions that education ministries can learn from – both inside and outside the public sector. Mongolia is expanding access to early childhood education for the children of nomadic families by designing portable ‘tent’ (*ger*) kindergartens that operate as satellite preschools.³⁷ The Tahderiyyah programme in the Philippines provides an alternative early education system that respects the Islamic values of parents in conflict-affected Bangsamoro communities.³⁸ During the summers, Ethiopia operates a school readiness program in emergency contexts for children from both refugee and host communities in the Afar Region.³⁹ And Kyrgyzstan operates seasonal schools to provide pre-primary education to children residing in mountain pastures in an effort to reach families far from urban areas.⁴⁰

Equity first

All of these interventions have one thing in common:

they start with careful consideration of why marginalized communities are not receiving services. Perhaps they are logistically unable to access the facilities. Perhaps they fear that the curriculum will not be inclusive of their traditions. Perhaps the fees simply put services out of reach. The answers will be different in every context and can likely only be fully understood by consulting with members of the community in question. These answers hold the key to pursuing an equity-first pre-primary education strategy.

To reach all these populations, UNICEF recommends that countries not on track to achieve the universal pre-primary target pursue one year of universal free pre-primary education first – and then gradually expand provision as system capacity grows.

This is in line with the Sustainable Development Goal indicator related to pre-primary education (4.2.2), which targets only one year of pre-primary school for every child – even though preschool education currently has a theoretical duration of three to four years in most low-income countries.⁴¹ When countries aim for too many years too quickly, they are in essence choosing to provide multiple years of pre-primary education for some children instead of one year for all. When such choices are made, hard-to-reach populations inevitably lose out.



Countries can and should prioritize hard-to-reach populations early on during their pursuit of universal pre-primary education – even if this means setting slightly more modest goals for quality and duration in the short run. The historical trends are clear: Without a strong equity-first strategy, expanding pre-primary education will initially serve only to increase inequality. Because pre-primary education has a greater impact on disadvantaged children, it holds the potential to reverse historical trends instead of exacerbating them.



Navigating hard trade-offs

Efforts to expand access to pre-primary education are rife with resource constraints and competing priorities – in other words, trade-offs. In this report, we have examined the biggest trade-offs standing in the way of funded, quality, equitable pre-primary education with an eye toward practical, defensible solutions that are sensitive to the realities on the ground. Countries can only navigate through these trade-offs by acknowledging them openly and building detailed, evidence-based strategies atop the sound principles outlined in this report.



Why should we scale up investment in pre-primary education when the demand for resources for other levels of education remains so high?

Pre-primary education is crucial preparation for the entire trajectory of a child's education – so underfunding this vital period of learning relative to other levels is counterproductive when pre-primary education could make education investments more efficient across all levels.



How do we progressively grow the pre-primary system while simultaneously improving quality?

By working towards context-specific, moderate, medium-term goals for both quality and access that can be simultaneously met. Progress towards these goals can be made only if the necessary investments in quality inputs come first.



How much effort should we expend targeting hard-to-reach populations when we could rapidly expand access among other populations?

We must explicitly include vulnerable populations when expanding access to pre-primary education because it has the greatest impact on disadvantaged students. Pre-primary education can therefore serve to narrow existing gaps instead of widening them, ultimately providing a greater return on investment.



Armed with these answers – and the evidence to back them up – we hope ministries around the world will begin laying the foundation for universal quality pre-primary education. We all share the same goal: seeing every young person benefit from education, learning, training or employment by 2030. Those young people are ready for pre-primary education today. Now, more than ever before, it is crucial to embark on the path towards realizing this vital opportunity and providing every child the opportunity she deserves.

Endnotes



Investing in pre-primary education vs. other levels of education:

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Growing access vs. improving quality

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		36	Computations by UNICEF, based on data from UIS global database, 2018. Emergency countries were identified based on UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children groupings in 2018. Estimation based on UIS pre-primary school-age population, and GER of pre-primary education in most recent year (2011-2017). For countries that do not have available administrative data, adjusted net attendance rate one year before primary entry age was used (Nigeria, Haiti, Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Afghanistan). Libya and Somalia do not have available data.
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Prioritizing expansion vs. emphasizing equity

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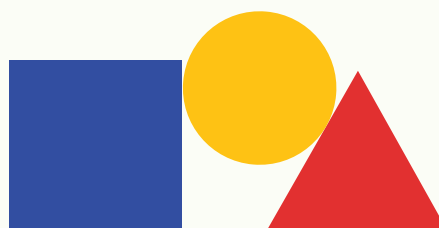
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A world ready to learn





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