Every Child Learns
UNICEF Education Strategy 2019–2030

Early childhood education; learning assessment; data and evidence
Assessing and costing early learning in West and Central Africa for an evidence-based expansion of quality early childhood education

Problem:
While countries in West and Central Africa (WCA) have expanded access to primary education, learning has not kept pace. A full 70% of Grade 2 students in francophone countries in this region do not achieve minimum proficiency in French, and 50% do not achieve minimum proficiency in Math (PASEC/CONFEMEN 2014). One of the root causes of low learning is low access to quality early childhood education (ECE): only 30% of children aged 3 to 5 years in the region (UIS, 2017) attend pre-school. Compounding the inequity, the poorest children in rural areas who would most likely benefit from ECE are effectively excluded, as most ECE services are concentrated in cities to families who can afford the fees.

Solution:
Starting in 2011, several countries in the WCA region began adopting a package of three tools to enable countries to generate evidence to expand quality ECE in national education plans, policies, and budgets:

1) a costing tool;
2) an early learning assessment module; and
3) a parental practice surveys.

This document summarizes the experience of using these tools to shape ECE plans, budgets, and policies.
Generating data on early learning to shape national plans, policies and budgets.

Evidence is clear that ECE is an effective strategy for improving learning outcomes in primary education and beyond. Learning assessment data from 9 francophone countries in the region revealed that children who had participated in ECE were twice as likely to attain minimum competencies in French in Grade 2 than their peers who had not. Moreover, the results showed that the gains in learning were long lasting: students who had previously attended ECE were one and a half times more likely to have attained the minimum literacy competencies in Grade 6 (PASEC 2014). These results are in keeping with the 2016 Learning Generation Report, which found that ECE was one of the most effective ways to improve learning as well as access.

Learning assessment data builds a powerful case for investment in ECE. This is the reason why countries in the WCA region are using the early learning assessment module as it helps policy-makers to produce strong evidence and ground policies and strategies for ECE. The assessment gathers rich information from the affordability of pre-school, the different types of service delivery, to measures of children’s cognitive and socio-emotional skills before they start primary. As of 2019, a total of 13 countries have completed an early learning assessment (Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Sao Tome & Principe, Senegal, and Togo).

70% of Grade 2 students in francophone countries do not achieve minimum proficiency in French

50% of Grade 2 students in francophone countries do not achieve minimum proficiency in Math

Source: PASEC/ CONFEMEN 2014
The 13 early learning assessments have generated valuable data that have shaped ECE policy in education sector plans and budgets in these countries, sparking significant reforms. For example, learning assessment data was used to justify the introduction of 1 year of ECE in Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire Mali, Niger, and Togo as a strategy to promote learning. In Sao Tome & Principe, the early learning assessment results grounded broader reforms to the primary curriculum and pre- and in-service teacher training since they showed children entering primary school had significant gaps in their knowledge of Portuguese, the language of instruction. Mali has integrated pre-school into the national education plan in 2017 and succeeded in increasing in the percentage of the education budget allocated to pre-school from 0.2% to 4% based on evidence produced by both ELA and the ECE costing tool.

The results in Cabo Verde shifted ECE policy in other ways to promote internal efficiencies. The assessment data was used to inform the policy decision to reduce the duration of ECE from three years to two years because the evidence showed that two years were sufficient to prepare children to transition to primary school. Resources could then be allocated to ensure quality of the two-year programme.

Finally, the early learning assessment tool has raised awareness among Governments about the importance of evaluating children’s learning at the end of ECE or at the transition into primary. Such an approach allows a more complete tracking of children’s learning trajectories and allows Governments to make necessary policy shifts to tackle barriers to learning early on, before the risk of dropout and repetition increases.

In 2018, an agreement was signed that incorporated the early learning assessment module into PASEC, the learning assessment system used in Francophone countries. As a result, any country participating in PASEC is able to incorporate a measure of early learning into their national learning assessment systems. The next step of this partnership will be the monitoring of progress made in countries who have included the ELA module in both the 2014 and 2019 rounds of the broader PASEC learning assessment. The results will continue to inform efforts to mainstream ECE and compulsory basic education reforms into national education sector plans, policies, and budgets.

**Cost effectiveness**

A strategic investment in the range of US $100,000 to $150,000 to conduct the early learning assessment and/or costing can lead to real results for pre-school-aged children, including significant policy reforms and increased domestic budget allocation for early childhood education.
Data from early learning assessments generates evidence to root ECE into national education sector plans, policies and budgets, increasing access to quality ECE opportunities for more children so that "Every Child Learns".

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