Problem: Lesotho is one of four countries participating in a UNICEF and Global Partnership for Education pilot programme called Better Early Learning and Development at Scale (BELDS). This initiative seeks to strengthen quality early childhood education (ECE) in the country. Only 46 per cent of Basotho children have access to early education that provides opportunities for early learning and healthy development, as well as increases their readiness to start primary school on time and learn. In Lesotho, the private sector provides 90 per cent of pre-primary services. Access is inequitable, with greater uptake in urban areas and among families who can afford the fees. In 2019, only 0.4 per cent of the education budget was allocated to coordinate, manage and strengthen ECE in the country.

Solution: To strengthen ECE across the country, UNICEF Lesotho is capitalising on the opportunity provided by the revision of the 2016-2026 national Education Sector Plan (ESP). UNICEF has invested in a consultant to the Ministry of Education and Training in Lesotho, who provides technical support to better coordinate the sub-sector, advocate for adequate funding and support government staff to manage the sub-sector. In June 2019, BELDS kicked off with a workshop for ECE stakeholders across the country to discuss current challenges and coordinate response in a strategic and sustainable manner. Ultimately, BELDS aims to integrate an ambitious vision and strategy for ECE in the revised sector plan, and to support the implementation of the strategy in a second phase.
ECE sub-sector diagnostic workshop

ECE can be an effective strategy to establish school readiness and improve learning outcomes in primary education and beyond. The ECE diagnostic workshop, which took place in June 2019, examined the legislative, policy and budgetary frameworks for pre-primary education, as well as the pre-primary curriculum, the workforce, family and community engagement, and quality assurance in the sub-sector (per the ECE conceptual framework excerpted from the 2019 report, *A world ready to learn – Prioritizing quality early childhood education*, p. 69).

The workshop highlighted several bottlenecks impeding the expansion of the ECE sub-sector in Lesotho:

- The low prioritization of ECE and budget allocation in the ESP;
- An outdated early childhood care and development (ECCD) curriculum;
- A shortage of qualified pre-primary teachers; and
- Inadequate quality assurance of pre-schools and ECCD centers.

Less than half of pre-primary aged children (46%) have access to ECE in Lesotho.

Only 0.4% of the education budget is allocated to ECE.
Preliminary results

The modest BELDS investment has resulted in a strong analysis of the pre-primary sub-sector in the education sector analysis (ESA) and consequently in a coherent and ambitious strategy to transform early childhood education in the ESP. UNICEF’s support has created momentum around critical initiatives such as improvements in data collection, analysis and use for pre-primary through Education Management Information Systems, the revision of the ECCD curriculum, the launch of the first diploma-level pre-primary teacher training course in the country, the development of a school readiness assessment tool and the development of early learning and development standards for children between 0 and 5 years old.

Additionally, UNICEF has helped develop and cost a strategy to scale up reception classes in the country, and this was presented to the Minister of Education and Training in August 2019. In the budget speech for the 2020-21 fiscal year, delivered in March 2020, Lesotho’s Minister of Finance explicitly referred to the “remarkable returns on investment” of early childhood care and education. The Minister also expressed its appreciation for UNICEF’s advocacy and technical support to strengthen ECCD.

These achievements built on the engagement of a wide range of national stakeholders and partners through the BELDS inception workshop and the subsequent establishment of an Early Childhood Education Technical Working Group. UNICEF supports the coordination and functioning of this working group, who has convened regularly since the onset of BELDS to discuss ECE-related issues.

These important milestones were achieved over an 8-month period from July 2019 to March 2020.

Lessons learnt and next steps

The following lessons have been learnt since the introduction of the BELDS programme in Lesotho:

- Ministerial commitment and leadership are critical to allocate adequate funding to pre-primary education and transform the sub-sector. Focusing on the continued engagement of government staff at the technical levels has demonstrated to promote continuity and progress in times of political instability (e.g. Cabinet re-shuffling).
- The BELDS diagnostic workshop, held at the onset of the project, was an interactive, consultative, and participatory process attended by most of the country’s stakeholders. This has created momentum, ownership and a renewed engagement to strengthen the pre-primary education sector.
- Technical support and advocacy have effectively ensured a strong and comprehensive analysis of the ECE sub-sector in the ESA and going forward, also in the ESP.

Cost effectiveness

An initial investment of US $125,000 has contributed to establish momentum to strengthen early childhood education in Lesotho, including a Technical Working Group, a revised curriculum, a new teacher training course, a commitment to scale up access to 1 year of pre-school and continued advocacy for an increase in the national funding for ECE while mobilizing external resources as well.
A small investment has helped to create momentum to transform early childhood education in Lesotho and to ensure that “Every Child Learns” right from the start of their learning journey.

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