
[What is happening in early childhood classrooms in the Gambia?](#)

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Educational quality

Teachers and teacher education

What drives positive interactions and teaching approaches in preschool classrooms¹ in the Gambia? IIEP-UNESCO, along with the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE), conducted a study where 112 early childhood teachers and their teaching approaches were observed, bringing new research findings to the fore.

The government of the Gambia has taken measures to improve access to early childhood education (ECE), leading to an increase in the gross enrolment rate from 36.4% in 2013 to 54.5% in 2019. Yet many children, especially those from the poorest households, still do not benefit from ECE services. Furthermore, ensuring the quality of the services is a major concern. According to a forthcoming cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA) of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres conducted by IIEP-UNESCO, only 4% of pre-schoolers in the Gambia are ready for primary school. The study also found that among factors that could help improve early learning outcomes, good **process quality**, such as positive teacher-child interactions and child-centered and play-based pedagogical approaches, was decisive.

What is the current state of ECE process quality in the Gambia?

Traditional analysis of the quality of ECE services tends to focus on indicators of **structural quality** (UNESCO, 2015), that refer to variables such as group characteristics (group size, adult-child ratios), caregiver characteristics (teachers' level of education, training, experience, mentoring) and characteristics of the physical environment, including materials, health, and safety (The World Bank- Early Learning Partnership, 2016). However, while this information is relevant, it is not sufficient. Many ECE experts argue that it is essential to have a deep understanding of the local context in which children evolve and to know what is happening daily in the classrooms. This is commonly known in the literature as **process quality**; it includes the nature of the interactions between teachers and children and the pedagogical approaches used in early childhood settings (UNESCO, 2015). However, one cannot analyze process quality without taking into account structural variables. Indeed, structural features "are considered to be important preconditions for process quality" (Slot, 2018), and as such work in pairs.

Using the [Measure Early Learning Environments \(MELE\) of the MELQO \(Measuring Early Learning and Quality Outcomes\) tool](#), IIEP and the MoBSE undertook a study in which 112 teachers in the last grade of preschool were observed to assess the level and quality of their interactions with children as well as their teaching approach in eight early development domains: numeracy, literacy, expressive language, storybook reading (listening and speaking skills), fine motor activities, open play activities, music or movement activities and gross motor activities.

Few ECD teachers are using a child-centered or play-based approach

Observation reveals that learning activities are very teacher-directed with little use of play-based principles. Teaching methods tend to favour repetition and/or directed activities. Teaching activities tend to be lecture-like, consisting of teachers speaking and children listening, with little leeway for the child to decide on what task to focus on and how.

High-quality classroom interactions are limited

Children's engagement in classroom activities remains a challenge and individualized interaction is limited in most preschools. Continued engagement (i.e. paying attention, looking at the teacher, focusing on the lesson, and participating in activities) is particularly low, with less than half of children reported as engaged during the classroom observation. Child engagement was also hindered by large class sizes (40 per class on average) limiting available classroom space and opportunities for group work. While best practices call for various forms of grouping throughout lessons (Lima and Barros Martins, 2019) – for example, the whole class, small groups, or pairs – 87% of cases used only one type of grouping – generally plenary sessions - with limited individual instruction practiced occasionally in 30% of the cases. On a positive note, teachers did encourage equal participation of boys and girls in almost 75% of cases, although more could be done to promote gender and diversity.

As far as disciplinary practices are concerned, a large proportion of teachers (48%) did not take any disciplinary action when needed or used negative verbal interactions, such as shouting, humiliating, threats or insults to manage children's behaviour. Negative physical discipline was less common, although close to 31% of teachers used some form of negative physical discipline during the class observation. In addition, barely a third of ECD teachers are tracking children's learning development (e.g. early literacy, early numeracy, fine motor skills, executive functions, etc.) on a regular basis, and children have their own portfolio in only 13% of classrooms. Without proper tracking, it is difficult for teachers to provide timely and appropriate interventions to keep children's learning achievement on track for primary school readiness

What are the main drivers of positive teaching practices?

To further assess what is shaping positive teaching practices we performed a multivariate analysis. The model included teacher's characteristics such as age, experience, and the support that the teacher receives from the headteacher, in addition to physical environment characteristics (available pedagogical materials, space, and safety) and group characteristics (class size, and multi-grade class). We also included two control variables related to the school ownership and region. Our dependent variable is the "process quality score" derived by summing the scores obtained by each teacher for each item in the pedagogy and interaction dimensions. ECE teachers' scores averaged 32 points, ranging from 22 to 45. As a higher score indicates a higher level of quality, the average score of 32 highlights overall poor process quality teaching practices. Key results are presented below.

Teacher initial qualification was a significant driver

Teacher initial qualification was found to be the most discriminating factor, while having an ECD certificate or having participated in an ECD in-service training had no effect on teaching approaches or the quality of interactions, raising concerns about their quality and relevance. These results remain quite counter-intuitive, as other evidence has shown that teachers who receive dedicated early learning education and training are more likely to implement a play-centered approach and have high-quality interactions with children (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008). One explanation could be that the ECD certificate was based on the old ECD curriculum (updated in 2019), which did not fully cover new developments related to child-centered and play-based approaches. On the other hand, the positive and strong correlation displayed between the process quality variable and initial education certification could be related to the fact that these certificates provide core and transversal skills that ECD teachers can use and apply in their daily practice. It is interesting to note that the possession of a certificate /diploma in education also has a direct effect on children's early learning outcomes (IIEP-UNESCO, forthcoming), implying that ECD teachers' initial education background affects children's learning both directly and indirectly via improved teaching approaches.

Specialized ECD training is too short and not fully targeting teachers' needs to have a significant effect

Regarding specialized ECD in-service training, only 43% of ECD teachers benefited from such training, usually for a maximum of four days. While probably too short to effectively impart teachers with the required knowledge and skills, the training topics might also not fully respond to teachers' needs. Most training focused on curriculum-related aspects (64%), followed by ECD teaching-learning methods (59%). However, teachers also expressed the need to be trained in classroom management (54%), teaching young children (46%), assessing children's development (43%), and "record-keeping" (34%). Many teachers deal with multi-grade classrooms and/or have students with special needs which, without adequate training, can make classroom management challenging and potentially detrimental.

The availability and use of pedagogical materials also matter

The process quality score is higher for those teachers who have appropriate pedagogical material available in the classroom. However, pedagogical materials are generally in short supply in most ECD centres in the Gambia, with art supplies, imaginative toys, blocks and art material particularly lacking. A shortage of basic furniture is also observed; only 75% of ECD classrooms are able to provide all children with a seat and access to a writing surface. Even when available, pedagogical materials are not always used, which could indicate a lack of teachers' skills on how to use the materials appropriately.

Headteacher support was not a determinant factor

Contrary to much of the literature which points to support from school leaders as helping teachers create a more engaging environment (UNESCO, 2019) we found no significant relationship between head-teacher support and ECD teachers' process quality scores. The relationship between headteacher support and positive teaching practice is in some cases negative (especially when the headteacher supports classroom management and children's play and learning). This result questions the quality of ECD centre head teachers' training and points to room for improvement in their daily support practices.

Recommendations

Our results support Cryer et al.'s (1999) findings that there is “no single level of variables that has an overwhelming influence on process quality,” and consequently, on children’s learning. In this context, it is crucial to ensure that ECD teachers in the Gambia have access not only to appropriate ECE education and training programmes, but also to adequate pedagogical materials and working conditions. Since the Gambia also faces financial challenges, it is important to maximize available resources. This paper proposes four broad recommendations to improve the quality of ECE in the Gambia and in particular process quality.

1. Strengthen the existing ECD teacher training offer

ECD teaching methods are very different from primary teaching methods. They require play and child-centered approaches for optimal learning. Given that many ECD teachers in the Gambia are primary teachers, it will be important for them to receive specific ECD education and training. The ECD certificate should be reviewed in line with the 2019 ECD curriculum to ensure that it provides teachers with the competencies needed to support more child-centered and play-based approaches, better-quality interactions, and effective classrooms management practices. Both pre-and in-service training can also be strengthened by including critical topics such as teaching young children, using a child portfolio, applying pedagogical materials correctly, using all forms of groupings during lessons, and managing large classes, multi-grade classrooms, and classrooms with children with special needs. Since ECD teachers holding an education certificate or diploma do display better ECD teaching practices, the MoBSE could also assess the feasibility of building on this initial ECD certification as a specialized certification stream.

2. Provide relevant training to ECD centre headteachers

ECD centre headteachers would benefit from specialized training on how to support, coach, and mentor ECD staff in their pedagogical practices to foster children’s learning, development, and well-being; issues that are not currently addressed during their inception training course. This could take the form of an upgraded inception training associated with regular ongoing training to enable headteachers to strengthen their skills and keep abreast of the latest developments.

3. Improve ECD teachers’ classroom conditions

Improving the classroom-learning environment is key to improving process quality in the Gambia. This includes investing in pedagogical materials, in particular in art and writing materials, and reducing class size. While the introduction of a dedicated School Improvement Grant (e.g., a per-pupil transfer to schools by the MoBSE) for ECE in 2020 is a positive step, cost-effective measures such as local production of pedagogical material (including by teachers) could also be promoted. Reducing the class size and lowering pupil-teacher ratios would require the recruitment of additional teachers, which could take the form of qualified teachers’ assistants to lower the cost.

4. Monitor standards on a regular basis

Many ECD classrooms do not meet physical space and other norms raising questions on the validity of the accreditation process. The MoBSE would need to review current accreditation tools and practices to identify any weaknesses and put in place remedial measures to ensure that ECD centres operate in an effective manner and under minimal requirements. The release of the 2019 curriculum provides an opportunity to revise existing ECD tools and instruments (minimum standards, classroom

observation tools) and ensure they are aligned with the current requirements. In this regard, the MoBSE could assess the possibility of ensuring tools such as the MELQO are an integral part of its assessment and monitoring mechanisms.

¹ In this blog article the terms early childhood education (ECE), early childhood development (ECD) and preschools are used interchangeably.

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