

School and learning readiness

Child development

The Education 2030 Framework for Action defines school readiness as ‘the achievement of developmental milestones across a range of domains, including adequate health and nutritional status, and age-appropriate language, cognitive, social and emotional development’ (UNESCO, 2016: 39). SDG Target 4.2 aims to ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education. While early childhood care and [family support](#) play a critical role in preparing children for school, the present brief focuses on the organized learning component of early childhood development - that is, pre-primary or early childhood education (ECE).

What we know

Access

Disparities in ECE enrolment are significant between countries and tend to be higher than for other education levels. National and regional data is mainly available for pre-primary formal education under the indicators ‘Participation rate in organized learning one year before official primary entry age’ (SDG indicator 4.2.2) and ‘School enrolment, pre-primary’. In terms of SDG 4.2.2, the enrolment rate at the global level stands at 67.2 per cent (2018); however, broken down at the regional level, the rate stands at just 42 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa but 96 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020). Gender disparities in access are less common in ECE programmes than at other levels. According to the 2007 Global Monitoring Report, pre-primary gender disparities at the expense of girls are found mostly in countries with very low gross enrolment ratios (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2006).

Quality

While access to pre-primary education has expanded, the quality of programmes has usually remained low. The universalization of primary education led to a drop in quality and this risk prevails for pre-primary education. When access is

increased, children's outcomes do not always improve. At times, efforts to increase access may exacerbate the problem of low quality (UNESCO, 2017). Findings suggest that high-quality ECE yields beneficial effects that last until secondary school, even when primary school is of mediocre quality, while poor pre-primary quality may even be harmful for brain development (UNESCO, 2015). The quality of ECE services depends mainly on a child-friendly and supportive learning environment, a developmentally appropriate play-based curriculum, sufficient learning materials, and, most importantly, well-trained and qualified teachers (IIEP, GPE, UNICEF, 2019)

Teachers

One of the main determinants of quality pre-primary education is the quality of the education workforce; their level of education and participation in training is a better predictor of quality than factors such as child-staff ratios or group size (Putcha, 2018). While teachers are already in short supply, a significant increase in numbers is required as countries look to achieve universal pre-primary education (UNICEF, 2019). According to UIS 2019 data, the percentage of qualified teachers in pre-primary education is 80.5 per cent at the global level and only 60.5 per cent in low-income countries. The level of remuneration, working conditions, and status of the ECE workforce is often poor; this leads to [recruitment challenges](#) and high attrition rates (Putcha, 2018).

Costs and financing

Pre-primary education is underfunded compared to other education levels, with an investment gap of almost 90 per cent in low-income countries and 75 per cent in lower-middle-income countries. Globally, 38 per cent of countries invest less than 2 per cent of their education budgets in pre-primary education (UNICEF, 2019). The Education Commission (2016) estimates that providing universal access to pre-primary education in low- and lower-middle-income countries by 2030 would require an investment of \$44 billion per year if countries pursue the guidelines that are often recommended. However, the benefits of ECE have been shown to far outweigh the costs, and it is argued that supporting early learning is a sound investment: 'Every \$1 invested in early childhood care and education can lead to a return of as much as \$17 for the most disadvantaged children' (Zubairi and Rose, 2017).

Impact on learning

Quality ECE is an investment for the immediate health and well-being of young children and for subsequent learning and development. A large body of research shows that ECE programme participation has a positive impact on primary school readiness. In turn, school readiness is linked to learning, school completion, later skill development, and acquisition of academic competencies and non-academic success (UNICEF, 2019).

Fourth-grade primary school children in Brazil who had attended day care and/or kindergarten scored higher in mathematics, compared to students who had not attended ECE services. First-grade children who had attended kindergarten in rural Guizhou, China, had literacy and mathematics scores significantly better than other children (UNESCO, 2012a), while children in rural areas of Mozambique who enrolled in preschool were 24 per cent more likely to attend primary school and to show improved understanding and behaviour (Zubairi and Rose, 2017).

By improving school readiness, participation in pre-primary makes enrolment in the first grade of primary school more likely reduces delayed enrolment, dropout, and grade repetition, and increases completion and achievement (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2006). Quality preschool programmes can also help children to develop resilience to cope with traumatic and stressful situations, such as conflict and other emergencies (UNICEF, 2019).

Equity and inclusion

Despite the evidence on the potential of ECE, children from poor and migrant families or those living in rural areas more often miss out or are enrolled in ECE of poorer quality than their more affluent or urban peers (UNESCO, 2015). Children living in the poorest households are less likely to receive support for early learning at home and up to 10 times less likely to attend ECE programmes (UNICEF, 2019), further widening the early learning gap.

According to the 2018 World Development Report, children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to exhibit learning deficits years before they start school, leaving them ill-prepared for the demands of formal education. These gaps are important predictors of performance throughout school and into early adulthood: ‘poor developmental foundations and lower preschool skills mean disadvantaged children arrive at school late and unprepared to benefit fully from learning opportunities. As these children get older, it becomes harder and harder for them to break out of lower learning trajectories’ (World Bank, 2018: 80).

Quality ECE programmes have the potential to compensate for disadvantage. They can also increase equity by promoting multilingual education, gender equality, and opportunities for disabled children and children in emergency or precarious circumstances. Evidence shows that disadvantaged students make the most dramatic gains from such programmes (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2006).

Quality ECE can mean early identification and remediation of impairments and can aid transition into mainstream schools (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2006). Earlier inclusion of children with disabilities to learn and play alongside their peers in mainstream ECE programmes promotes transition into primary school, reduces stigma and isolation for the child and their parents, and has positive socio-emotional and academic benefits for students of all abilities.

Quality ECE programmes can contribute to addressing stereotypes, in particular those related to gender. While curricula may emphasize gender equality, the programmes often promote gender-specific expectations, with teaching materials strengthening gender-specific roles, game-playing conforming to stereotype, and, even more importantly, teachers frequently not treating boys and girls the same (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2006). Well-designed ECE programmes based on gender-neutral curricula can challenge these stereotypes, provided that they are accompanied by changes in teacher attitudes and behaviour.

Ensuring free access to quality ECE programmes for minority and disadvantaged children is important. ECE programmes can contribute to the inclusion of families from minority backgrounds, provided that they are culturally relevant, delivered in the local language, and use resources that come from within the community. To improve the access of minority parents to existing ECE and parental support programmes, initiatives should be culturally sensitive to parents' child-rearing beliefs and practices and should integrate local identities and knowledge (UNESCO, 2012b; Naudeau et al., 2011). ECE programmes can also help children develop their self-esteem by using their mother tongue while acquiring a second (and sometimes a third) language (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2006).

Challenges and policy options

Improving early childhood teacher training and recognition

Improvements in programme quality and child outcomes are often correlated with better-educated and trained teachers, though it is difficult to identify the optimal duration and combination of initial education and professional development. Training strategies that promote a continuum of practitioner development, beginning with pre-service and continuing with ongoing in-service training that is maintained throughout the careers of ECE professionals, can be developed (Garcia, Pence, and Evans, 2008). Teachers' competences and standards can increase the relevance of training and professional development, enhance the quality of monitoring and mentoring opportunities, support the professionalization of the workforce, and support workforce planning efforts (Putcha, 2018).

Mainstreaming ECE in education sector plans

ECE appears in most education sector plans, but its inclusion is usually insufficient to address the development of the subsector (IIEP, GPE, UNICEF, 2019.). Mainstreaming ECE throughout the education planning process can help ensure the provision of universal public pre-primary education and improve its integration in the education system. Comparative studies show that universal services can yield significantly higher enrolment rates among poor families than policies that target specifically the poor, and therefore the former have greater equalizing potential (UNESCO, 2015). However, specific measures to foster the participation of the most disadvantaged can help ensure they are not left behind. Education sector planning provides a mechanism to strengthen the pre-primary subsector and enhance its ability to deliver equitable and quality ECE to all children: 'Credible education sector plans that integrate pre-primary provide the basis by which governments can provide an overall vision for the pre-primary subsector and guide decision-makers and implementers in the process of delivery of ECE' (IIEP, GPE, UNICEF, 2019: 15). They also support the mobilization of the domestic and external resources needed for the subsector to expand.

Increased and more-efficient funding

The provision of funding for pre-primary education should not be seen as a loss of support for other subsectors of education, but rather as a core strategy for strengthening the entire education system. Responding to this financial need requires greater pooling of resources through coordinated cross-sector committees represented by education, health, family welfare, and other ECE-related services (UNICEF, 2019). In addition to increasing funding, resources need to be targeted at those at risk of not learning. Decision-makers should prioritize the most disadvantaged and early years where social returns are highest while

minimizing household spending on basic education by the poor (Education Commission, 2016)

Cooperation with other ministries and coordination of non-state providers

Quality early childhood development programmes that go beyond education and tackle all relevant issues promoting children's holistic development require a coordinated approach across the education, health, nutrition, and social protection sectors, from a range of actors, both public and non-public. Community-based organizations, NGOs, religious groups, and for-profit entities can support government efforts to expand, improve, and coordinate ECE provision (Education Commission, 2016). To create links among different policy areas affecting the lives of young children, several governments have recently begun to elaborate national early childhood policies that cover health, nutrition, education, water, hygiene, sanitation, and legal protection for young children (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2006).

Tools

- [**Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes**](#) (MELQO) (UNESCO, 2017). This initiative aims to promote feasible, accurate, and useful measurement of children's development and learning at the start of primary school, and of the quality of their pre-primary learning environments.
- [**International Development and Early Learning Assessment**](#) (IDELA) (Save the Children, 2017). This tool measures children's early learning and development. It provides a holistic picture of children's development and learning covering motor development, emergent language and literacy, emergent numeracy/problem solving, and social-emotional skills.
- [**Holistic Early Childhood Development Index \(HECDI\) Framework**](#) (UNESCO, 2014). The HECDI Framework provides a set of targets, sub-targets, and indicators for the holistic monitoring of young children's well-being at both the national and international levels.
- [**SABER-Early Childhood Development**](#) (World Bank, 2016). This tool allows policymakers to take stock and analyse existing early childhood development policies and programmes, identifying gaps and areas needing policy attention.

References and sources

- Education Commission. 2016. [*The learning generation: Investing in education for a changing world.*](#)
- Global Education Monitoring Report Team. 2006. [*Strong foundations: Early childhood care and education.*](#) EFA global monitoring report, 2007. UNESCO: Paris, France.
- Global Education Monitoring Report Team. 2020. [*Inclusion and education: All means all. Global education monitoring report, 2020.*](#) Paris: UNESCO.
- Garcia, M.; Pence, A.; Evans, J.L. 2008. [*Africa's future, Africa's challenge: Early childhood care and development in sub-Saharan Africa.*](#) Washington, DC: World Bank.
- IIEP, GPE, UNICEF. 2019. [*Mainstreaming early childhood education into education sector planning. Course reader for module 1: The rationale for investing in pre-primary.*](#)
- Naudeau, S.; Kataoka, N.; Valerio, A.; Neuman, M.J.; Elder, L.K. 2011. [*Investing in young children: An early childhood development guide for policy dialogue and project preparation.*](#) Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Putch, V. 2018. [*Strengthening and supporting the early childhood workforce: Competences and standards.*](#) Washington, DC: Results for Development.
- UNESCO. 2012a. [*Expanding equitable early childhood care and education is an urgent need.*](#) Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO. 2012b. [*Indigenous early childhood care and education \(IECCE\) curriculum framework for Africa: A focus on contexts and contents.*](#) UNESCO/International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa: Addis Ababa.
- UNESCO. 2015. [*Investing against evidence: The global state of early childhood care and education.*](#) Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO. 2016. [*Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*](#) Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO. 2017. [*Overview: MELQO: Measuring early learning quality and outcomes.*](#) Paris: UNESCO.
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). 2019. [*A world ready to learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education.*](#) New York: UNICEF.
- World Bank. 2018. [*World development report, 2018: Learning to realize education's promise.*](#) Washington, DC: World Bank.

Zubairi, A.; Rose, P. 2017. [*Bright and early: How financing pre-primary education gives every child a fair start in life.*](#) London: Theirworld.

[print](#)