GPE KIX BRIEF

The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange

# POLICY AND PRACTICE INSIGHTS EARLY LEARNING

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***A synthesis of eight research projects supported by GPE KIX in 19 low- and middle-income countries offers practitioners and decision-makers insights for strengthening and scaling quality early childhood education to reach more vulnerable children.***

Photo: GPE/ Carine Durand

Early learning is widely recognized as a critical factor in children's cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development, supporting long-term educational outcomes. Good quality early childhood education (ECE) benefits not only children, but also their families and communities. As primary caregivers in most contexts, women benefit from the time freed up by access to ECE, which enables them to generate income, contribute to family and community well-being and exercise greater agency.

Global access to ECE has doubled over recent decades — from an average of 30% of children in 1986 to slightly over 60% in 2019. But this access is uneven, with enrolment ranging from 21% in LMICs to 79% in high-income countries, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.[1,2] The pandemic deepened these inequalities, with ECE services receiving limited support during the crisis, compared with other education levels.

While governments and international donors are investing to strengthen access to quality ECE services, scaling is hampered by a focus on infrastructure, with less emphasis on other aspects essential to quality, such as curriculum integration, teaching capacity, classroom inclusion, and the use of age- and context-appropriate pedagogy and learning materials.

## THE RESEARCH

From 2020 to 2024, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) supported eight research projects that generated new knowledge by testing ECE innovations in 19 low- and middle-income countries. These projects aimed to strengthen early learning systems by promoting play-based curricula and pedagogy, teacher capacity-building, gender equality, equity and inclusion (GEI), and community engagement. They also worked with governments to strengthen their capacity to integrate ECE into education sector planning, and drew lessons on factors that can support scaling of successful ECE innovations.

## APPLIED RESEARCH PROJECTS ON EARLY LEARNING

1. **Inclusive Child-to-Child Learning Approach: Scaling Up Inclusive Play-Based Learning for Smooth Transition from Pre-primary to Primary School** (Child-to-Child) in Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda
2. **Promoting Positive Early Learning Outcomes Through Strengthened Capacity in Learning Through Play** — Evidence from Nigeria, The Gambia and Kenya (Promoting Positive Early Learning)
3. **Gender-Responsive Education and Transformation: Early Childhood Education Through Play for Scale** in Mozambique and Rwanda (GREAT-ECE)
4. **Scaling the School Readiness Initiative — Strengthening School and Community Capacities for Adoption of Play-Based Learning** in Uganda and Zambia (SSRI)
5. **Teacher Capacity Building for Play-Based Early Learning** in Ghana and Sierra Leone (Teacher Capacity for PBL)
6. **Adapting, Testing, and Scaling a Proven Summer Pre-primary Education Model** in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Tanzania (LEARN Plus)
7. **Integrating Early Childhood Education in Sectoral Planning** (BELDS) in Kyrgyz Republic, Lesotho, Sierra Leone, South Sudan and Tajikistan
8. **Inclusive Home-Based Early Learning Project** (IHELP) in Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe

*Five of the eight projects were cofinanced by the LEGO Foundation

Photo: GPE/ Stephan Bachenheimer

## KEY FEATURES OF QUALITY ECE

A synthesis of this research summarized findings on five topics considered key to implementing and widening access to effective early learning:

- **Play-based pedagogy.** Play-based learning is a child-centred approach that puts play at the centre of teaching and learning. While many national education policies endorse play-based learning in the early years, implementation remains a challenge. GPE KIX research found that efforts must go beyond integrating PBL in policy frameworks. It must be included in curricula, with resources to guide teachers and others in facilitating learning through play. Securing active community and parental involvement is crucial, as is strengthening teacher capacity to use PBL effectively. Incorporating locally relevant and culturally appropriate play-based materials, such as songs, stories and games, makes ECE programming more affordable and more likely to be sustained.

- **Teacher training in PBL.** A lack of qualified teachers is a significant barrier to effective implementation of PBL. Given the limited number of ECE training institutions in low-income countries, GPE KIX projects focused on developing and testing flexible and innovative teacher-training strategies. Peer-to-peer learning and communities of practice were among those that proved effective in strengthening teacher capacity and confidence in facilitating learning through play. Projects recommended regular teacher mentorship and continuous professional development to ensure long-term success.

- **A focus on gender equality, equity and inclusion.** To ensure children get the best possible start for lifelong learning, the early years offer a critical window to identify learning disabilities and ensure education is valued for both girls and boys. Incorporating gender equality, equity and inclusion (GEI) considerations into early learning can shift attitudes about gender roles and perceptions of disabilities, benefitting children, parents and the community at large. Findings from across projects showed the value of creating community awareness and dialogue and strengthening the capacity of key actors — such as teachers, parents and caregivers, community leaders and policymakers — to address GEI. The research emphasized breaking down gender stereotypes and promoting inclusive practices that benefit marginalized children, particularly those with disabilities. Engaging fathers and addressing stigma around disability proved valuable to ensuring inclusive ECE environments.

- **Parent and community participation.** Active involvement by parents and communities is essential for the success of early learning programs. Their engagement ensures that these programs are more relevant, effective and sustainable. This was demonstrated in several GPE KIX projects, which used various strategies to engage parents and community members, including through workshops, participatory research, social media and awareness campaigns. For some projects, community involvement was integral to building and maintaining centres and play areas that support PBL. In rural and disadvantaged areas, such involvement is especially important, and can be nurtured by adult-literacy programs and providing government support and guidance.

- **Strategies to sustain and scale ECE.** Relationship building proved key to the sustainability and scalability of ECE programs. This included working in partnership with a range of stakeholders — from engaging parents and communities, to strengthening the capacity of government agencies to integrate early learning models into education sector plans. Engaging key stakeholders as co-creators and implementers fostered ownership and sustainability of interventions. It helped to ensure that learning resources and approaches are contextually relevant and culturally appropriate, which is another key consideration in sustaining quality ECE. Actively involving school managers, community leaders and other relevant stakeholders in planning and implementing early learning innovations proved effective in building these relationships. Gaining political support from the outset was crucial and can be strengthened by demonstrating the value and cost-effectiveness of ECE innovations.

# IMPACTS OF ECE INNOVATIONS

In testing and assessing a range of ECE innovations, GPE KIX projects observed positive outcomes that benefitted learners, teachers, parents, communities and national education systems.

## ENHANCED SCHOOL READINESS

Experts increasingly recognize the value of ECE in supporting children's transition to formal schooling. In Cambodia, Lao PDR and Tanzania, LEARN Plus adapted and tested a contextualized 10-week summer pre-primary (SPP) program to support the expansion of quality ECE in underserved communities. It built upon previous pilot-testing of Plan International's LEARN accelerated SPP model in Laos by including a deeper focus on gender equality and inclusion before scaling out to all three countries. Results of an impact study showed that the SPP can help prepare children in small rural villages for school at an affordable cost and without requiring more infrastructure or teaching staff. Ninety-four percent of children who participated in the program enrolled in Grade 1 on time, compared with only 57% of those who did not have access to ECE. Participants also scored higher in numeracy and language learning.

In Uganda and Zambia, SSRI worked closely with education officials from national to local levels to strengthen capacities to adopt PBL and ensure a smooth school-entry transition. Building on lessons learned from implementing the School Readiness Initiative in two provinces of Zambia, the project designed an enhanced early learning framework that incorporated contextually relevant elements, with input from teachers, parents and children. In Uganda, the project brought education stakeholders together to establish objectives for developing a play-based national curriculum. This collaborative process shaped the development of a comprehensive training manual and guides for parents, school administrators and caregivers. A web-based, mobile application was designed to provide an online learning system that helped parents, caregivers and educators to support children's school readiness and transition.

## GREATER SKILL AND CONFIDENCE IN TEACHING THROUGH PLAY

Even in contexts with limited resources for teacher training, research saw positive results from working with teachers to enhance play-based learning. A number of projects worked with teacher training institutions to refine their training curricula and incorporate play-based pedagogies. Several also developed curriculum guidance manuals for teachers and parents to provide additional support in using PBL methods.

In Ghana and Sierra Leone, the project Teacher Capacity for PBL studied the implementation of two training programs by Right to Play, in both rural and urban settings. They found teachers were positive about PBL

and understood its value in spurring children's language development and other areas of growth. With close mentorship and support, teachers showed continuous improvement in their ability to use PBL approaches. Sixty-seven percent of those who took part in continuous professional development programs rated their ability to focus on cognitive development and learning as very good, compared with 33 percent of those who did not.

Several projects developed manuals and guidelines to support teachers' capacity development. These included the Nigeria Pre-Primary Teacher's Capacity Building Manual developed through the Promoting Positive Early Learning project to support implementation of a new play-based curriculum. In Gambia, a teacher capacity-building manual and parent-engagement strategy were developed and aligned to the country's open and active learning ECE curriculum. Pre- and post-training assessments conducted through Promoting Positive Early Learning saw gains in teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes from training in PBL pedagogy. This progress sparked interest from school managers in supporting further capacity-building initiatives for educators.

## GREATER EQUALITY AND INCLUSION IN EARLY LEARNING

GPE KIX projects contributed in many ways to breaking down stereotypes related to gender and ability. LEARN Plus supported equal access to education for girls and boys by raising parents' and caregivers' awareness of GEI issues. According to end-line results in Tanzania and Cambodia, there was gender parity in the summer pre-primary program enrolment, although there continued to be challenges with parents' attitudes around gender equality in education. The manual for Cambodia's parenting sessions was expanded to add additional units, stressing the importance of men's participation in parenting, equal parenting and ways to change gender norms.

In Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe, IHELP addressed the stigma experienced by children with special needs through sensitization exercises that targeted fathers, mothers, communities, teachers and policymakers. This changed negative community perceptions of these children and resulted in learning centres becoming more accommodating by using learning models that attend to the needs of every child. In the GREAT-ECE project, teacher training, combined with refresher training and ongoing support and supervision for teachers, also proved effective in changing teachers' perceptions about learners with disabilities. It helped teachers to see disabled learners not as "problem" learners, but as children with unique backgrounds and potential.

## COMMUNITIES THAT VALUE AND SUPPORT ECE

In some GPE KIX projects, the support of parents, communities and other key stakeholders proved instrumental in sustaining early learning innovations. Both IHELP and the Child-to-Child project, for example succeeded in established new early learning centres in rural areas that previously had none — thanks to community engagement. Child-to-Child included income-generating livelihood activities that increased

the involvement of male caregivers, brought parents together and generated income for the centres to ensure their sustainability. In Uganda, community members were actively engaged in the introduction of the IHELP centre, garnering widespread acceptance and an active volunteer base to sustain it. Parents took management positions as chairs and committee members, aided in financial management and offered to supervise activities at the centre. Other community members supported project planning and budgeting, offered advice on the use of Indigenous teaching and learning materials, provided financial support, donated food and firewood, and provided cleaning and security services.

In Uganda and Zambia, community mobilization efforts through the SSRI project led to infrastructure improvements in several childcare centres and the provision of outdoor play parks for home-learning centres.

## TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO HELP GOVERNMENTS SCALE INCLUSIVE, HIGH-QUALITY ECE

To help governments move forward in implementing their policy frameworks and scaling ECE services, projects worked to strengthen capacities at different levels, and developed resources and guidance materials to help parents, teachers and communities support quality ECE, in line with government objectives.

The BELDS project increased awareness and uptake of the ECE Accelerator Toolkit — a comprehensive and practical global toolkit that helps GPE partner countries plan for and implement ECE at scale through their sector planning and implementation processes. Using the project's findings and capacity-strengthening activities, Sierra Leone, Lesotho, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan have integrated ECE into national education systems. Capacity strengthening for GPE partner countries has resulted in wider use of the toolkit, reaching beyond those that took part in the project.

In South Sudan, the Department of Early Childhood Education mobilized resources for ECE system strengthening, thanks to BELDS support to increasing the capacity of its technical working group, staff and education partners. This contributed to the development of a national ECE policy, strategy and implementation plan. The government subsequently allocated 13.6% of its total 2022 education budget to ECE.

In Lao PDR, LEARN Plus ensured that the knowledge and evidence it generated aligned with priorities in the country's education sector plan. For instance, a study was initiated to provide evidence on the feasibility of scaling the 10-week SPP, and guidance on where and how to scale the program. Costing was an important component of this analysis. LEARN Plus provided local and provincial authorities with estimates on the costs associated with scaling up the SPP in remote areas, with active community engagement. The overall yearly cost of the adapted program was USD383 per child, falling to USD238 per year if the program continued to be rolled out in the same communities, given that materials and initial trainings had already been designed, and teachers would only need refresher training.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

**1 Integrate play into the ECE curriculum.**

Curricula for early learning should be centred on age-appropriate play-based learning. Including resources to guide both teachers' and parents' in using PBL, and conducting regular monitoring and evaluation, will help to ensure that quality standards for ECE are met.

**2 Strengthen teacher training and expand access to training programs.**

Continuous professional development, mentorship and hands-on training should be prioritized to build teacher confidence in delivering play-based pedagogy. Pathways to training should be expanded to include digital and other long-distance options that are more accessible to those in rural and remote areas. Scholarships could also help in attracting more new teachers into the ECE field.

**3 Promote gender equality, equity and inclusion.**

GEI considerations must be mainstreamed into ECE policies and programs, with a focus on addressing the needs of marginalized groups, including children with disabilities and girls. To widen access to ECE services in rural and disadvantaged areas, a range of service delivery models can be used, including home- or community-based ECE centres, the child-to-child approach, or mainstreaming pre-primary education and delivery through subsidized for-profit providers.

**4 Foster community engagement.**

Parent and community involvement should be actively promoted through awareness campaigns and training, ensuring that all stakeholders are invested in the success of early learning programs. Community-based participatory research, webinars, workshops and other events are just some of the approaches that can encourage dialogue and collaboration with other education stakeholders, giving parents and communities a role in fostering continuous learning, adaptation and improvement of ECE.

**5 Ensure sustainability and scalability.**

ECE models should be integrated into national education sector plans based on cost-effectiveness analysis and other evidence, and governments should collaborate with local and international partners to ensure long-term sustainability. ECE services require investment to support capacity-strengthening for teachers, curriculum development and infrastructure. Supply- and demand-side innovations should be considered in funding ECE, such as grants or subsidies to service providers, or vouchers or tax breaks for families.

Photo: GPE/ Ludovica Pellicioli

***These policy insights are drawn from Early Learning: A Research Synthesis.***

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) is a joint endeavour between GPE and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) that aims to ensure partner countries have and use the evidence and innovation they need to accelerate access, learning outcomes and gender equality through equitable, inclusive and resilient education systems fit for the 21st century.

Five synthesis reports were commissioned by GPE KIX to consolidate evidence across research projects conducted between 2020 and 2024. Topics include: data systems and data use; early learning; gender equality, equity and inclusion; teacher professional development; and out-of-school children and youth.

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