



POLICY BRIEF

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RETHINKING THE UGANDA LEARNING FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN LIGHT OF GLOBAL EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGICAL TRENDS

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Introduction

A number of studies have now proven that significant investment in the lives of children in the early years has the potential of making them flourish and thrive as adults (Tucker, 2020). This investment, however, can only be beneficial if directed to where there is a greater promise of effect (Heckman, 2012). This investment is best utilized if it is directed towards developing early learning activities or curriculum that will engage children and lay the foundation for the flourishing of their potentials. In 2005, the Uganda National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) developed a learning framework for Early Childhood Development that caters for children of 3-6 years. For the last 16 years, this framework has been a basis for providing and supporting children's holistic development. However, being a policy document that must always be reviewed after every five years, the framework review is long overdue. Besides the time factor that requires the framework to be reviewed, there are also other issues like changes in early years' pedagogy, global trends in technology advancement, focus on the 21st Century skills and emerging issues in the provision of early years education that were not envisaged at the time of drafting the framework.

The Problem

The current learning framework has outlived its relevance in guiding learning in early years. A number of studies by both local and international researchers have been conducted on the implementation of the learning framework for ECD in Uganda. Many of the studies acknowledged the critical role the framework has done in providing guidance for teachers and caregivers to provide for children in different settings from rural to urban (Ezati, Madanda, & Ahikire, 2018), refugee to internally displaced communities (Kyazze, 2018). There are, however, some areas of concern about the use of this framework. Some of it include: being difficult to interpret by caregivers (Cambridge Education, 2017; Kyazze, 2018; Nakabuubi, 2017), being confused with a curriculum, having limited support materials for it (Obbo, 2017) and a generally negative attitude toward some private proprietors towards its use in their centres (Ejuu, 2012).

The identified concerns have continued to perpetuate poor usage of the framework, thereby impacting the quality of ECD service provision in Uganda (RTI, 2018), the rise of privately sponsored parallel curriculum, and the proliferation of for-profit examination bureaus that are turning early years education into an academic nightmare for children. This situation has also not been helped by limited support supervision that is always provided to pre-primary teachers by either local or national experts (MoGLSD, 2020).

A closer review of the learning framework for ECD (3-6 years) itself reveals that it provides for play-based pedagogy (MoES, 2020), in practice, lessons are highly academic-oriented with children overburdened with regular testing that have limited pedagogical direction from the framework. Early years' pedagogy now dictates the use of play pedagogy that helps to foster creativity and imagination (Ali, et al., 2018; The LEGO Foundation, 2016; Tonyan, Paulsell & Shivers, 2017).

Since early years' education lays the foundation for all other future potentials of human resources, there is now ever a greater need to review the framework as exemplified below: The current framework was designed to teach facts and experiences, yet now we need children to construct their own knowledge. There was a focus on the use of learning areas in the framework, yet now we are more focused on integrated knowledge. The current framework focuses on the use of didactic pedagogy, yet we now need to focus on interactive methodology including e-pedagogy. The framework focused on learning in the classroom and schools, yet emerging trends and lessons from COVID-19 now point to learning from anywhere.



Policy Options

While it is clear that the learning framework for ECD (3-6 years) needs to be reviewed, emerging pedagogies now dictate different approaches to it. NCDC can opt for any of the following:

1. Maintain the use of the learning framework as a framework as before. This is a good approach in maintaining minimum guidance while giving communities flexible options of adding or modifying content based on their preferences, cultural diversity and local experiences. This approach is commonly used in Jamaica, Singapore, Mauritius, among others. The challenge with this approach is that it assumes that the teachers or caregivers who will be using the framework are competent enough to translate the guidance into a workable curriculum or syllabus. In Uganda, this is still a big challenge that has made use of the framework unrealistic.
2. The second approach is the use of a curriculum that specifies simplified content for teachers and caregivers to plan as lessons for children in identified classes. This approach is being used in Zimbabwe. The advantage of this approach is that the simplified content is easily understood by even the lower cadre caregivers to support learning, as envisioned by NCDC. The challenge with this option is that tries to bring it uniformity and discourages diversity where it could have been applied.

Taking any of the two options above also requires choosing one of the following options below:

3. Maintaining the framework in its current status and updating content areas that need either reworking as on page 49 of the learning framework. The advantage of this approach is that it generally takes a shorter time to do it. Also, it is easier to identify problematic areas and refine them. The disadvantage of this approach is that it maintains the one critical setback for the framework implementation. That is the inability of teachers and caregivers to interpret and use it.
4. The other option is to rethink the learning areas afresh, introduce emerging areas, define new competencies and provide content in a simplified version. This approach is good in that it takes care of emerging content and competencies, emerging pedagogy for the 21st-century learner and takes care of global trends in early year's education. The challenge with this approach is that it will take slightly more time to complete it.

The following options will also need to be considered with any of the options taken above. One of them has to be chosen:

5. Choose to work with a learning areas approach which follows a subject-based version of a curriculum but with a change of name from subject to the learning area. This approach is liked because it helps teachers to be more focused on developing specific learning area competencies as provided. It is also a generally easier approach in that it requires limited effort from the teachers. Its major disadvantage is that it mimics the subject-based academic orientation of the primary school that lead children to cognitive overload and loss of interest in school. It is also one of the factors that influence the transition of children to primary school.

6. Take on the integrated approach in which weekly themes are identified and specific competencies are developed in an integrated way. The competencies are still identified from specific learning areas that are not reflected in the curriculum but in the curriculum standards. This approach as used in Ghana and Japan is used to deliver integrated knowledge using interactive methodologies. The disadvantage of this approach is that it may require more assistance to be given to teachers who have not been part of this process to implement it.

Researches that focus on the implementation of the Uganda learning framework for ECD (3-6)years

SN	AUTHOR	YEAR	PAPER TITLE	STUDY AREA	SAMPLE	FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
1	RTI International	2018	Uganda Early Years Study Milestone 3: Final Report	National (24 districts)	4,312	The quality of pre-primary education is still low	Government to invest more in pre-primary to improve quality
2	Kyazze Magera Deborah Rebecca	2018	Implementation of the learning framework for three to six-year-olds; Uganda Wakiso district case	Wakiso district	105	some caregivers were using the Learning Framework Caregivers had a challenge of interpreting it, assessment procedures and record-keeping	Interpretation of the Learning Framework
3	Betty Akullu Ezati; Aramanzan Madanda; Josephine Ahikire	2018	Improving Learning in Rural Lower Primary School through Provision of Informal ECD: Lessons from an NGO Model in Uganda	West Nile & Acholi region	775	Although children exposed to the pre-primary curriculum at HLC scored slightly higher than those who did not go to HLCs, they did not achieve the level of proficiency in numeracy and literacy as desired.	Build in a strong national advocacy element in ECD interventions
4	Nakabuubi Petronella	2018	Teacher competence and implementation of the learning framework for ECD in selected pre-primary schools: Rubaga municipality, Kampala	Rubaga, Kampala	159	Teachers did not effectively follow the LFW when teaching Teachers failed to interpret the LFW Parents were never involved in the implementation of the LFW	Make the LFW more user friendly Train teachers to use the LFW
5	NPA, MGLSD	2020	Planning for Increased Access to Early Childhood Care and Education Thematic Studies Report.	National (36 districts)	696	Support supervision on the use of policy documents was not being done at the local levels	Develop guides to support the interpretation of the LFW Review of the ECCE learning framework
6	Cambridge Education	2017	Report on the existing ECE models and implementation status of the ECD policy provisions	National		40% of lessons conducted in ECD did not reflect play pedagogy Most ECD teachers have access to the Learning Framework but struggle to understand it There was more demand for training on the LFW Many companies have come up with lesson plans, schemes of work	Simplify the Learning Framework for 3 – 6 year olds and translate it

7	Ejuu Godfrey	2012	Status of the implementation of the ECD policy	National (17 Districts)	53	60% of the centres visited had the LFW, but caregivers were struggling to use it. Most centres keep the LFW in the office for purpose of showing the inspectors but not to use it.	Support caregivers to use the LFW
8	Budget Monitoring and Accountability Unit (BMAU)	2016	Quality Pre-primary Education in Uganda: How can universal access be achieved?	National	Think Piece	Appropriate materials specified in the Learning for pre-schools were only found in “high class” pre-schools.	Train more ECD teachers and have them certified
9	Obbo Jimmy	2017	Embrace early childhood development education	Kampala	Think Piece	ECDs teach children to cram yet the centre has developed a learning framework for ECDE No penalties for nursery schools that do not comply with the NCDC framework Proprietors dictate what teachers have to follow in ECD Many schools do not use the LFW	Use more play materials
10	National Planning Authority	2015	Pre-primary and Primary Education in Uganda: Access, Cost, Quality and Relevance	National	Document Review	Learning Framework specified the kind of learning materials for preschools, However, most of the materials are not available	Developing a pre-primary education curriculum with emphasis on activities developing the child's creative, physical, emotional and social skills besides literacy and numeracy

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