

## Improving education systems for enhancing early childhood development:

The provision of quality ECE is critical to help children acquire knowledge and physical, social, intellectual and emotional skills, and close the achievement gap between children of different socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>ii</sup> 175 million children globally do not receive any form of formal pre-primary provision, and others those that do often experience poor learning

Pre-primary, or early childhood education (ECE), usually focuses on children aged 3-6 years old, and employs a holistic approach to introducing young children to organised instruction outside the family context, aiming to support children's cognitive, physical, social and emotional development (UNICEF 2019).

environments.<sup>iii</sup> The British Academy-led GCRF/DFID Early Childhood Development (ECD) Programme supported research that examined: structural inequalities in the provision of ECE; the effectiveness of scalable teacher training to improve classroom environments and learning outcomes, and; the effect of parental schooling on the ECD outcomes of their children.

### Evidence

A research project in India found that the largest state-supported Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme in the states of Tamil Nadu and Bihar faced several challenges in relation to the differing sociocultural needs of different disadvantaged communities.

In Tamil Nadu, tribal communities had difficulty accessing ECCE centres because of dangerous wildlife and overflowing rivers during monsoon season, while in Bihar, caste hierarchy prevented Scheduled Castes/Tribes from participating in the formal ECCE system. In a village in Bihar, for example, the *anganwadi* (childcare) centres had few resources, irregular staffing and poor student attendance with little learning taking place. Young children were exposed to developmentally inappropriate forms of learning that included long lessons, rote-learning, lack of opportunities for play, and corporal punishment. The institutional forms of ECCE provision were considered the only legitimate site of learning, making marginalised families' indigenous rich cultural models of childcare and socialisation seem irrelevant. School readiness was seen as assimilation with the cultural practices of the dominant castes and classes. English-medium and private boarding schools were therefore sought out because they were seen to protect children from the 'village environment'. Promotion of such forms of learning reinforced the social domination over marginalised families.

This project identified an alternative financing model which would make the anganwadi programme more locally responsive and decentralised. Taking account of local context, practices and needs, this community responsive model offers more flexibility locally, whilst ensuring accountability and sustainability. A costing exercise conducted in 17 ECCE centres in 5 different states informed by ethnographic insights showed that it is possible to encourage community-specific practices while meeting global standards.

In Ghana, one study evaluated the impact of teacher training and the involvement of parents in improving ECE quality. This longitudinal study assessed the impact of an affordable and potentially scalable in-service training and coaching programme for kindergarten teachers (of 4-6-year olds) in private and public schools in the Greater Accra Region. Improving activity-based instructions and positive behaviour management in ECE through teacher training was found to improve children's trajectories of learning and executive function skills (the cognitive processes that allow for planning, reasoning ability and the integration of thought and action) which are important for successful adaptation to school. Two years after the intervention, when the children transitioned to primary school, the positive effects on children's academic skills, non-academic skills and executive function were sustained.

The study, unexpectedly, found that combining parental awareness with teacher training *reduced* the rate of growth in children's school readiness skills, such as numeracy and literacy. Researchers suggested that parents preferred traditional teaching and disciplinary practices and saw pre-school as a critical time for preparation for children's learning and social skills. They pushed back on the student-centred pedagogies that teachers were being taught. Boys experienced a greater negative impact of parental involvement than girls, suggesting that parents placed greater emphasis on their sons' pre-schooling than their daughters' despite the enrolment rates being equal for both. This points towards persistent gender inequality embedded in parental values.

Another research project made a major contribution to the understanding of the previously lesser-known effects of the intergenerational transmission of education by examining the extent to which free secondary education in one generation led to improved ECD outcomes for the next generation in Ghana. The study followed men and women who had participated in a prior randomised control trial (RCT) in 2008. The RCT offered the participants a four-year scholarship to attend senior high school. Without this financial assistance, beneficiaries of the intervention would not have attended secondary school. The research asked if the children of the men and women in the treatment group (at ages 14-18 months, 3 years, and 5 years) had different cognitive development across different domains (literacy, numeracy, language, social

relationships and executive function) compared to the children of those in the control group. The preliminary analysis indicated that the secondary school scholarship for adults had had a positive effect on their children's cognition scores, finding also that these effects were found to be stronger for the children of women who had received the scholarship. The study suggested that supporting secondary schooling for adolescents may be one of the most effective interventions for fostering the successful early development of their (future) children.

## Recommendations

- Downward extension of the formal education system for providing ECCE through models that overlook local historic, social, economic and cultural contexts are not only developmentally inappropriate, but could also perpetuate existing structural inequalities;
- Community-responsive, rather than centralised, models of costing and financing ECCE could improve outreach, enhance accountability, and provide local flexibility whilst also meeting global standards;
- Training teachers to promote activity-based instruction and positive behaviour management improves children's learning trajectories. However, parental preference for traditional approaches can negatively impact on the effectiveness of new methods. Moreover, greater alignment between ECE and primary schooling could further improve outcomes and sustainability;
- Supporting secondary schooling particularly for girls and children in poverty improves the ECD outcomes of their (future) children.

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i This note was written by Dr Arif Naveed, University of Bath. The British Academy is very grateful for his work. This note is based on British Academy-funded projects 'The impact of parental education on cognitive development in early childhood: evidence from the long-term tracking of a randomized evaluation in Ghana' (Professor Esther Duflo FBA), 'Examining the contexts, practices and costs of early childhood care and education in India: responsive models for child development' (Dr Jyotsna Jha, Dr Arathi Sriprakash) and 'Assessing sustained impacts of the Quality Preschool for Ghana teacher training intervention on children's early primary grade outcomes' (Dr Sharon Wolf). The projects are part of the British Academy-led DFID/GCRF programme on [Early Childhood Development](#), which investigated the dynamics of early childhood development in low- and middle-income countries.

ii Rose, Pauline, and Benjamin Alcott, 'How Can Education Systems Become Equitable by 2030?', DFID Think Pieces – Learning and Equity, United Kingdom Department for International Development, London, August 2015, pp.12–14,

iii United Nations Children's Fund, A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education, UNICEF, New York, April 2019.  
United Nations Children's Fund, 'Early Childhood Education', UNICEF, New York, December 2017,