

to six years is also appreciated. However, opportunities for early learning in children begin as early as conception. Therefore, the component of early stimulation should be adequately integrated in the programming for ECE to promote the learning at home as this is the window of hope to stimulate psychological and psychosocial development. There are approximately 2.3 million children in the age range of three to six years in Zambia. According to the 2019 Ministry of General Education Statistical bulletin, only 35.2% of grade one entrants had pre-school experience. There are approximately 1,952 ECE teachers deployed to teach in the public schools/centers out of 14,512 registered teachers at Teaching Council of Zambia. The teacher pupil ratio at ECE is currently at 1:86 as opposed to the 1:25 recommended standard. Additionally, most ECE centers are managed by unqualified caregivers with limited educational levels and are engaged as volunteers without a salary. Out of 8, 537 public primary schools only 3,997 schools have annexed ECE centers. However the infrastructure being used is inadequate and not age appropriate.

Research has established that high quality ECE programmes provide sizeable benefits to the state and local economies (Matafwali, 2015). For each one dollar invested in high quality, Early Childhood program a state economy will get a 2 dollar to 3 dollar return on investment. ECE services help to modify distressing social economic beliefs, practices and gender related inequalities, where society feels the woman should be associated with house chores and restricted participation.

Financing

Despite a strong case for investing in young children, current levels of financing for ECD fall far short of those necessary to provide access to high-quality services for all children from birth. In terms of financing, it has been on record that ECE is among the lowest funded in the education sector at 0.05 % of the education budget. Given limited public funding and provision in Zambia, private enrollments in ECD programs are high, with households contributing substantial resources.

Implications for ECE

Brain plasticity decreases with age so early interventions are more effective than later. Prevention is less expensive than treatment. Much as there is political will to ECE service delivery, issues with regard to access, quality, financing and efficiency pose a great challenge to the implementation of ECE programs:

- Most children still have limited and poor access to ECE services. This therefore means that most children lack smooth transition and preparedness for grade one. The holistic development of the child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs contribute to building a solid foundation for life-long learning and well-being.
- Limited access to ECE deprives children the opportunities for early screening, identification and intervention for special education needs and disabilities. The clearly identified teacher qualification, teacher-pupil ratio, limited play, teaching and learning materials as well as teacher-pupil contact time have impacted negatively on the quality of ECE provision.
- Efficiency – The non-existence of the ECE structure at lower levels makes it difficult to adequately coordinate, monitor and implement ECE service delivery. The officers being assigned to shoulder ECE are already overwhelmed with their core responsibility areas.
- Parents and guardian involvement in economic activity for survival. Increasing ECE services will allow for parents and guardians to be able to hold a steady job and therefore have a steady income. Parents and guardians who are primary caregivers of their children are at times forced to leave or miss work when a child is sick or child care arrangements fall through.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Short term

1. Increase public investment in Early Childhood Care, Development and Education from the current 0.001% to 3% of the national education budget in order to ensure access to quality and holistic ECCDE services especially for children in rural areas of Zambia.
2. Develop guidelines for integrated early child education for children with disabilities to ensure effective delivery of inclusive education
3. Fully integrate nurturing care for ECD in relevant government policies namely the 8th National development Plan and the next Education and Skills Sector Plan (ESSP)
4. Develop programme for supporting early learning through home based initiatives for children below 3 years in the next ESSP
5. The Ministry of General Education must adopt the nurturing care framework in the delivery of ECD services and this should include activities relating to the early stimulation of children 0-3 years old to supplement what Ministry of Health is doing in the provision of child health services.

Medium term

6. Establish multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms for the delivery of ECD services across the nurturing care framework.
7. Prioritize investment in the creation of stimulation centers which are community based and coordinated by Ministry of General Education to reach out to as many children as possible with the focus of leaving no one behind.
8. Recruit and deploy at least 1,000 qualified ECE teachers annually in order to support the annexing of more ECE centers to existing primary schools.
9. Apart from the provision of ECE through annexing centers to existing primary schools, the Ministry of General Education must promote the establishment of community based low cost ECE centers in farms, markets, and workplaces as well as through television and radio.
10. Leverage on the national integrated approach to planning to ensure the promotion of multi-sectoral planning and financing for all ECD services including ECE delivery

Conclusion

Early childhood development is crucial to creating a solid education foundation. Reasons for how an Individual acts, behaves, and thinks can be traced back to the kindly early learning received. The Ministry of General Education has achieved key milestones in provision of ECE services through the creation of a Directorate which has radically transformed Early Childhood Policy and service delivery in Zambia. Inadequate investments have characterized sector with inappropriate infrastructure, play and teaching materials which has highly affected the standard of ECE/ECD education in the country.

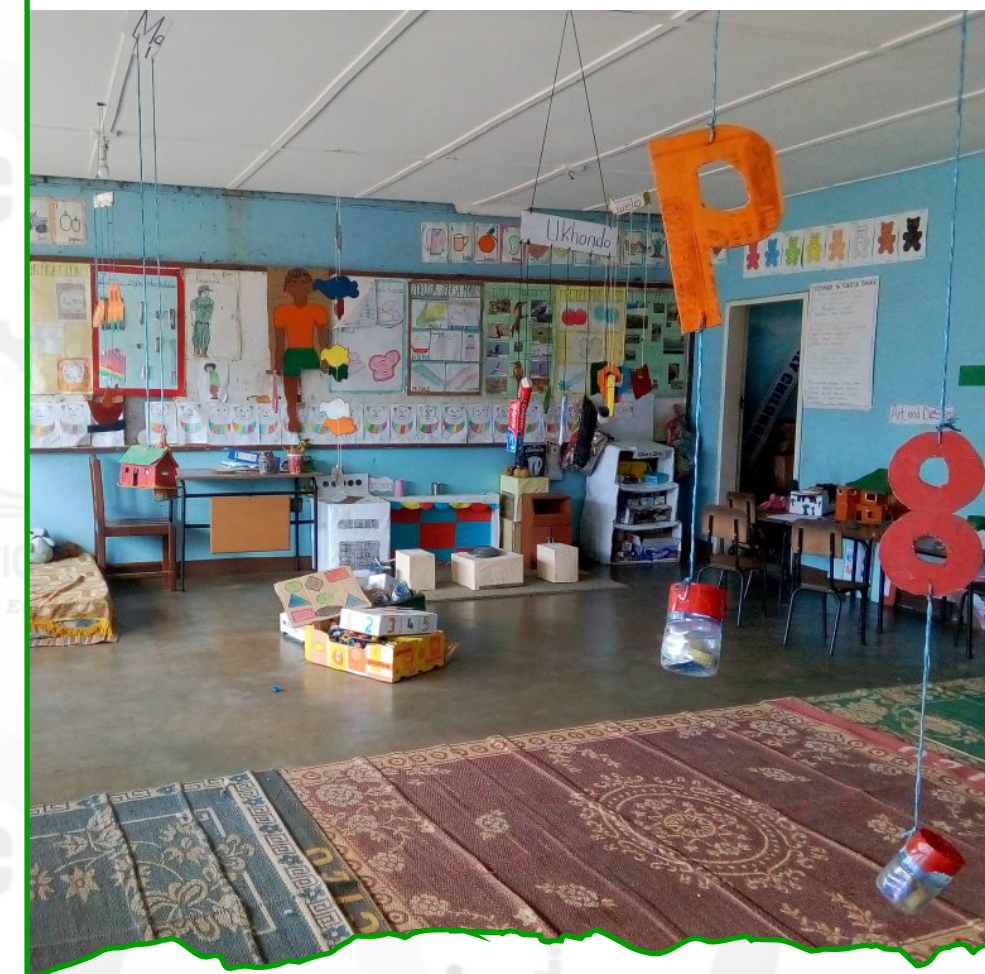
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EARLY STIMULATION AND LEARNING POLICY BRIEF



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Executive Summary

The pace of learning for children between zero to three depends on whether and to what extent the child's environment provides stimulation. There can be no question that the environment in which a child grows up has a powerful impact on how the child develops and what the child learns. The government and technocrats have turned their attention to expanding Early Childhood Education (ECE) enrollment as one strategy for improving learning outcomes in Zambia. While ECE enrollment has risen consistently in recent years, enrollment alone is not enough. High-quality being a wholesome combination of ECD and ECE programs offer, developmentally appropriate instruction hence the need to ensure ECD and ECE which are well coordinated within one ministry to allow for maximization of resources.

The growing agreement regarding the importance of early education stands in stark contrast to resources provided for in the education and skills sector national budgets. Key to promoting quality early childhood, from the coalition's perspective, is a significant investment in ECE that requires adequate levels of financing and human resource deployment.

Introduction

This policy brief aims to present current developments in Early Childhood Development (ECD) provision in Zambia. It discusses measures that can be labelled as ECD provision and offer examples of how these measures are being implemented in Zambia. The brief also provides examples of potential good practice. The purpose of this brief is to inform decision about policies, programmes and practices currently operating. Although we aim to provide a broad overview of the situation of ECD/ ECE in Zambia, we will limit our discourse to the current provisions. We further propose alternative avenues to explore in the sphere of promoting child development. We use information provided by national documents from relevant ministries and governmental bodies.

The current ECD system in Zambia is composed of a patchwork of programs with distinct but overlapping purposes and designs. These programs are administered by multiple line ministries and agencies, including the Ministry of General Education, the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Local Government, the Ministry of Youth Sport and Child Development and various non-state actors. These agencies are often funded by and accountable to multiple cooperating partners at all levels. The complexity at the national level is passed down to lower levels of administrators, who do not have the authority to untangle the web. District-run ECE programs are often isolated depending on the supporting agency.

Seemingly, there is a likelihood that families, caregivers and early educators are gradually forgetting that they should never displace the role of unstructured, unguided, interactive and creative play, which is the best way children learn. In fact, unstructured playtime is more important for brain development in young children than any type of method and process used. Children should have exposure to many opportunities for early learning such as different types of play, including those where caregivers and teachers are guiding the play and where play is with peers and/or independent play where the child uses objects to represent characters of interest. All these are stimulation strategies that set a foundation and preparation for future learning. Early stimulation means the set of actions, exercises and the environment that aim to help develop the child's abilities in developmental domains, whether physical, cognitive, emotional and social aspects. In other words, the aim is to offer children different situations that allow them to manipulate and explore the environment thus, awaken skills and naturally develop abilities.

Who therefore, should be the first educator to the child? What type of cultural values should be passed on to the child? What should be put in place by the government and stakeholders to ensure all children get the best jump start to life? Who should be the target and what approaches can make it happen? These are some of the responses this Policy Brief seeks to bring out.

Zambia will clearly benefit if all children, from birth to six years, have access to high-quality Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE) that begins with home learning before moving to center based learning. Together we can do it!

Approaches and Results

Early Childhood Development (ECD) - 0 to 3 years

Zambia has a large unmet need for affordable, high-quality ECE. There are thousands of children in our country whose families earn just a little for survival and cannot afford the cost of high-quality ECE. These parents can still be partners with the state in getting empowered on child development principles and practices. Investment in young children is the accountable thing to do. All children deserve an opportunity to grow into healthy, educated, and competent persons, no matter where and when they were born. While parents bear most of this responsibility for raising their children, especially in the early years of life, the government also has an important role to undertake during this critical time of human capital buildup. The government through its ministries and agencies, should ensure that all expectant mothers and young children have access to quality health services and nutrition. They should also support parents and other caregivers in providing a positive and stimulating environment for children from birth on by promoting parenting information programs, investing in direct services such as home-based visits, funding daycare centers and preschools, or providing financial incentives to access good quality programs for infants and children.

The term ECD is increasingly being used to reflect the evidence that young children's survival, health, care and learning involves interconnected and dynamic growth processes from well before the infant is born through their early school years. The growth of children, including the resources and risks of their development are shaped within their household and immediate environment notably with the mother, father, siblings, other caregivers which, gradually extend into wider communities' contexts such as church, health facilities, pre-schools and other social facilities. These interactions and exposure determine the extent of brain development necessary for all human endeavors.

Many brain functions are particularly sensitive to change early in life and become less plastic (malleable) over time (Heckman 2008). In fact, much of a child's brain architecture is "wired" in the first 5 years of life (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000), which leaves little room for adjustment later on. For us to have a turnaround in all areas of development we need to grow children who are creative, well balanced and decision makers or critical thinkers. What makes someone a critical thinker or decision maker is the capacity of the brain that they carry which is heavily influenced by the level of stimulation they underwent during their childhood, more critically the first 1000 days. Research has clearly revealed that brain development is cardinal in all faculties of human development.

This entails that if a child is deprived of nutrients, stimulation and exposure that may support such, his/her reasoning and operational capacity is undermined and we refer to them to being stunted. According to the Zambia Demographic Health Survey, 35% of children below the age of 5 years in Zambia are stunted. This calls for serious investment in child growth and development aspects. Investment in the early years provides one of the greatest potentials

to reduce health inequalities within a generation (WHO, 2008). We appreciate what the government is doing for children aged 0 to 3 years through the Ministry of Health by implementing the Caring for Child's healthy growth and development-ECD package. This package promotes adequate nutrition, good health, and stimulation. However, in reality, the stimulation component has been under-implemented due to the overwhelming responsibilities in the health sector. Currently, there are no deliberately established stimulation centers in the health facilities. As such, the messages on play and communication are still not adequately pronounced and emphasized during antenatal and under-5/growth monitoring promotion in the health facilities. Research has also revealed that a child who is well stimulated would perform better than the child receiving food supplementation only. More beneficial to the child who receives both stimulation and food supplementation as their performance would be closer to a non-stunted child. This has been proven by the Jamaican longitudinal study on brain and child development.

Implications

According to Grantham *et al.* 2003, ECD programs that show parents how to positively interact with their infants and toddlers through both touch and verbal communication are particularly important in these early years. Failure to provide stimulation during this window of opportunity damages human potential:

- A child will lack social competence, social perception, behavior management and self-regulatory abilities.
- If by 9 months, children are not exposed to early stimulation in language development, the child will have challenges in production and understanding of words, ability to tell stories and identify letters, comfort and familiarity with books.
- A child who is not provided with mental stimulation will have poor analytical skills, mental problem solving, memory and early mathematical abilities.
- In terms of nutrition, children who are stunted have a predictive of low cognitive and overall development in early childhood and later life.
- Children who receive assistance in their early years achieve more success at school. As adults they have higher employment and earnings, better health and lower levels of welfare dependency and crime rates than those who did not have these opportunities.
- Efforts to improve early childhood development are an investment, not a cost. Available cost benefit ratios of early interventions indicate that for every dollar spent on improving ECD, returns can be on average of four to five times the amount invested and in some cases much higher.
- When ECD component is not well provided for it affects ECE learning.

Early childhood Education (ECE) - 3 to 6 years

ECE consists of organized, supervised programs with social and educational goals for children in the temporary absence of their parents/guardian. These days, it is well understood that Early Childhood Education can help to build a strong foundation for the children. Thus, acknowledging the importance of ECE.

We appreciate the efforts and strides government has made by transferring ECE from Ministry of local government to Ministry of General Education. The Ministry of General Education has clearly demonstrated its commitment to promote the prominence of ECE in the education sector by providing a national curriculum, annexing ECE centers to primary schools and above all creating the Directorate of ECE.

The efforts government has made to create the Directorate of ECE with the mandate to promote early education for children aged three