

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE)

DEVELOPING FERTILE GROUND FOR A BETTER START TO LIFE AND IMPROVED LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS

AWARENESS

The first eight years of a child's life (prenatal period included) are decisive for human development. Yet five years from the deadline set for the attainment of Education for All (EFA) goals, statistics on early childhood in Africa are appalling.

- Of the 76% of children entering primary school each year, 38% have experienced moderate or severe malnutrition with adverse consequences on their psychomotor and cognitive development.
- Three million children each year are at risk of a mental disability due to iodine deficiency in mothers during pregnancy.
- One million children have learning difficulties and other disabilities caused by neonatal asphyxia as a result of high-risk pregnancies and births.
- 12,000 children die every day under conditions that could have been avoided – the equivalent of a Boeing 747 crashing every hour.

For several decades, science has demonstrated that the nutritional and health status of children has a direct impact on their early learning ability and socialization, as well as on their psychomotor and cognitive development. To recognize that all knowledge and skills acquired during this period between the ages of 0 and 8 will form the basis of the child's personality and social success, is to provide all African children with the opportunity to learn to be, to do and to live.

It was alongside the international community that African leaders pledged in 2000 to “expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.” This commitment is also the first EFA goal. However, less than 12% of African children currently have access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services.

THE UNESCO APPROACH

To lay the foundation for a quality education, it is important to plan all interventions from the prenatal period to 15 years. During this time interval, particular emphasis should be placed on the 0–8 year period, regarded as the decisive period for successful learning.

UNESCO has adopted a holistic and integrated approach, through support to different stakeholders who consider childhood development as a whole. Four key principles govern all interventions in this area and serve as an entry point to ECCE:

- conducting advocacy for early learning from 0–3 years;
- preparing the child for success during the 3 to 6 year age interval;
- improving the quality of primary education for 6–8 year old children; and

- including early childhood care and education in policies.

UNESCO therefore provides expertise to:

- Harmonize and establish a framework of action for ECCE: All ECCE stakeholders at the national and regional levels agree on the need for a holistic approach based on research and the critical analysis of the situation of children in the 0–8 year interval, with a view to effectively assisting in the formulation and review of ECCE policies in the region, as well as to encourage the establishment of an institutional framework.
 - o *Example of a practical application: ECCE policy review is a methodological tool that makes it possible to perform a critical analysis of existing policies not only in terms of formulation, clarity and feasibility but also with regard to concrete results or difficulties noted during implementation.*
- Promote multi-stakeholder policy dialogue: This is a key factor for the success of all interventions in the field of education and ECCE in particular. Synergies can then be built between the different visions, orientations or strategic actions of stakeholders such as the State, technical and financial partners, civil society, etc. by setting up working groups, think tanks and other consultative frameworks so as to raise awareness with regards to the need to coordinate stakeholder interventions.
 - o *Example of a practical application: UNESCO's Regional Bureau for Education in Africa (UNESCO BREDA) is the chair of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) working group on early childhood development.*
- Exchange best practices, promote and disseminate innovative experiences: By encouraging the adoption of ECCE community models consisting of one to two years of compulsory pre-primary education, or by developing parent education programmes for the 0–3 year age interval, UNESCO and its partners contribute to promoting intergenerational learning. Moreover, applying a holistic vision to education is a guarantee that the process will be effective in terms of return on investment and value for money.
 - o *Example of a practical application: country profiles and the database on ECCE best practices in Sub-Saharan Africa are initiatives undertaken by UNESCO in collaboration with its partners to speed up the achievement of ECCE access, quality and management objectives.*

TANGIBLE RESULTS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

The various advocacy actions conducted by UNESCO and its partners led to a significant and highly symbolic act at the continental level as the African Union adopted early childhood development as the 8th objective in the Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa. The actions undertaken by the ADEA working group on early

childhood development under the auspices of UNESCO BREDa at the 4th African International Conference undeniably enabled the African Union to better understand the scope of education and early childhood care issues and challenges for the development of Africa.

Concrete actions have hence been taken at various levels:

- In harmonizing and establishing a framework for action: UNESCO helped to review Senegal and Kenya's ECCE policies, and the recommendations and conclusions on coordination among sectors, strategic planning and increasing enrolment numbers are being implemented. Following a participatory, open and dynamic process, which involved all stakeholders and combined national and international expertise, Kenya has adopted ECCE as a mandatory component of basic education as of 2011. Pre-primary education is now integrated into all sectoral programmes of countries where a progress report was prepared. This has the advantage of providing an institutional base in the education sector programme, which is now subject to more rigorous planning and implementation mechanisms.
- In promoting multi-stakeholder policy dialogue: The ADEA working group on early childhood development chaired by UNESCO BREDa is an illustration of a functional consultation mechanism among the different stakeholders with a view to making significant progress at the national, sub-regional and regional levels. It is considered a platform to exchange and harmonize positions, analyze supply and demand, and provide clarifications on the ECCE conceptual framework in the Africa region. It includes ministers, technical and financial partners as well as NGOs and experts.
- In exchanging best practices, promoting and disseminating innovative experiences: UNESCO – through the periodic publication and updating of country profiles, the publication of a compendium of best practices and the implementation of case studies on the projected demand for ECCE teachers – promotes peer review mechanisms, the modelling of approaches and the creation of an enabling environment to scale up activities through improved planning and better resource policies. Furthermore, UNESCO offered support to the government of Senegal to put into practice its idea of building community-based centres (Cases des Touts Petits) for 0–6 year old children and their mothers. The first four such centres were built by UNESCO. Today there are over 400 centres in Senegal.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

ECCE as a holistic approach remains a challenge. In order to endorse efforts deployed to date, UNESCO presented a project to launch a regional campaign on education and early childhood care in Africa during the Moscow World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education (WCECCE) in September 2010. This was presented on behalf of the working group on early childhood development. To accelerate the achievement of EFA goals, especially Goal 1 which is directly related to ECCE, significant measures will be taken to help countries:

- Further engage African governments and development partners to include ECCE on their respective agendas;
- Integrate ECCE into national development plans and programmes so as to raise sufficient resources;
- Increase public spending in education, health, nutrition and well-being, with a view to effectively targeting, in terms of spending, young children and mothers during pre-and post-natal periods. The aim is to also improve access to ECCE and the use of quality basic services, by offering supplies to children enrolled in preschool, for instance;

- Educate families and communities for a full awareness of their responsibility in providing care to their children according to the principles of ECCE.

LESSONS LEARNED

For peace and sustainable development to prevail, African leaders and their partners know that it is essential to focus on an integrated approach that takes into greater account the future of the child. As a result, Early Childhood Care and Education is now considered a central and fundamental feature that should underpin the basic education reform process in Africa (BEAP). UNESCO and its partners have made various tools available to Member States (policy papers based on recent neuroscience research, etc.) to achieve these objectives and deliver quality results. All of these actions are part of the effort to restore hope to young people on the continent, to believe in a brighter future and to participate in the development of their homeland.

LINKS AND GATEWAYS

- Basic education reform process (BEAP): ECCE is the entry point of the BEAP approach which targets 0 – 15 year old children.
- Education on HIV & AIDS (EDUCAIDS): Through prevention education to eliminate HIV transmission from mother to child so children are born free from HIV and to teach children about stigma and discrimination
- “Knowledge for Empowerment” (LIFE): For parent education based on functional literacy content and providing critical skills to non-literate parents, particularly mothers.
- Teacher Training Initiative in Sub-Saharan Africa (TTISSA): For the availability of quality teachers in sufficient numbers for ECCE.

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

- Governments: For decision-making.
- The network of First Ladies: For advocacy and media influence.
- Association for the Development of Education in Africa: Through the working group on early childhood development for policy dialogue and analysis.
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF): For aspects relating to parent education as well as child protection and survival.
- World Bank: For increased investment and the development of innovative models.
- Aga Khan Foundation, Bernard Van Leer Foundation: For the integration of models tailored to the needs of the populations (Koranic schools).
- Save The Children: For pilot programmes and operational field activities.
- Child Forum: For advocacy and institutional lobbying.