

Towards quality early childhood development caregivers and teachers: reflections on a sustainable qualifications framework for Uganda

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Introduction >>>

Quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes have been known to lay a firm foundation for human and economic development of children, families, and the nation. The extent to which children benefit from such programmes is largely dependent on the quality of caregivers and early childhood education (ECE) teachers. Whereas there are still disagreements on what quality entails in various ECD settings, there seems to be an agreement on the low quality of ECD caregivers and teachers in many centres in Uganda. This paper highlights the cause of the low quality among the caregivers and teachers and indicates how a Qualifications Framework (QF) can be used to improve the quality of ECCE teacher preparation.

Nelson Mandela once noted that Education is the most powerful tool that a nation can use to bring her people out of poverty. Every country depends upon the ability of its education system to mentor its people along particular career paths. This system should be flexible enough to allow both academically and skill-based pathways that cater for people who may be caught in disadvantaged situations and need assistance and guidance. In terms of ECD programmes, it has been noted that they thrive best when organised and implemented in a context that is consistent with cultural and environmental settings (Ball & Pence, 2000). In this regard, there are no better people to be employed as caregivers than those people who reside in the same community as the children. The community child care workers who have been seconded by communities to take care of their children are the best option for sustaining ECD initiatives in communities.

In Uganda, while we look to ECCE teachers to sustain community ECD centres, the process that is meant to develop their competence to a recognisable level is problematic. While it is believed that the ECCE teacher preparation system is comprehensive in Uganda through the Caregiver Training Framework (2012), the reality is that this pathway is peppered with bottlenecks that do not allow progression from one level to another. It is common knowledge that most ECCE teachers are not academically competent, but are considered proficient in child care and have the confidence of their communities. If we are to instill greater quality in such teachers, we need to have flexible career paths that recognise their inherent capabilities and challenges. At present, the rigid academic structure and limited career guidance continues to encourage high turnover of this cadre of teachers, who regularly depart the system. It should be noted that those who persevere through the academic pathway are often not particularly skilled at implementing child

care practice, which require a mentoring attitude. Thus, it seems we have to choose between producing academicians who will neglect the ECD centres and non-academic personnel who have passion for ECD at the grassroots. Or, alternatively we design a system which promotes both groups of people through varied career paths.

The Current Caregiver Pathway in Uganda >>>

Figure 1, below, shows the current ECD caregiver/teacher pathway.

Figure 1: Current ECCE teacher pathways

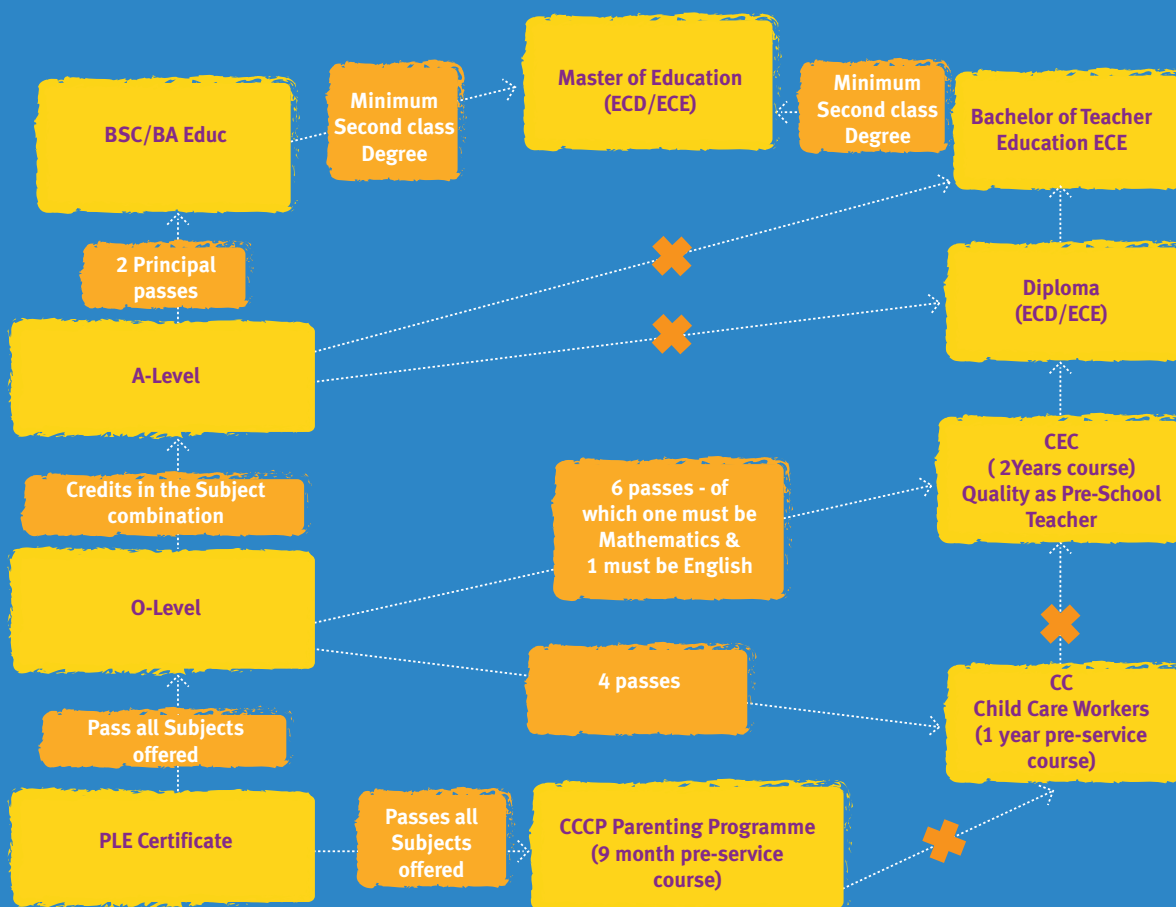


Figure 1 shows the minimum qualification level in the education pathway for practicing in the ECD field as the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE). This means that anybody who has not attained a PLE is considered not to have had formal education and so cannot work in this sector. The only career option for those who do not wish to or cannot progress through the academic route is the Community Child Care (CCCP) course. This is a nine-month parenting programme meant to sensitise parents on how best they can support their children at home to improve their early childhood development experiences. In terms of job prospects, such a person is expected to “support children’s holistic development in homes” (ECD Caregiver training framework, 2012 p19). Figure 1 illustrates this as a career dead-end.

For those who are interested in the academic path, from the PLE level, one must pass all the subjects in order to qualify to proceed for lower secondary education, and sit their Ordinary Level exams (‘O’ Level). Following ‘O’ levels, successful candidates can proceed to higher secondary

levels to sit the Advanced level exam (A-Level). Where a student fails to obtain the desired credits at 'O' level, to proceed to 'A' level but has obtained six passes which include a pass in English, he or she can opt to do a certificate in ECD teacher education, the CEC (ECD Caregiver training framework, 2012 p33). The certificate is a two-year course that prepares trainees to become an ECCE teacher. Those who possess this CEC qualification have a clear pathway that allows them to move through the diploma, degree and eventually post graduate courses in ECD. If the learner fails to obtain six passes at 'O' level or fails to get a pass in English even if he/she has more than six passes, such a student can only opt for the Certificate in Child Care (CCP). The CCP course is a one-year caregiving programme that prepares caregivers to work in day care centres and children's homes. The CCP does not prepare them to teach in nursery schools. However, because of a grave shortage of ECCE teachers in the country, many of these child care workers have found themselves in pre-school classes as teachers; it is argued that it is better to have them take care of children than have the children looked after by someone with no qualification at all. However, all those who opt for this career route find themselves facing a dead end, as there is no career progression linked to it. This is because this course is not considered an entry requirement for any other course. Figure 1 illustrates this with the red crossed arrows, showing that the CCP leads nowhere.

Learners who have the required passes at 'O' Level can progress along the academic path to 'A' level. It should be noted that at this point, those who decide to go to 'A' level cannot pass into any ECD courses. The career pathing assumes they are too qualified to work in the ECD sector. They now have the option to go to university to pursue other courses in non-ECD professions, if they obtain 2 principal passes. If the student obtained only one principal pass, he or she can opt to take a diploma in another course, but again, not in ECD. If the individual is interested in joining an ECD course, the only route open is to use his or her 'O' level qualifications, assuming they have the prerequisite passes, to join the ECD teacher certificate programme.

Thus, the current pathway only favours a student who joins ECD after completing 'O' levels. The challenge however, for this pathway is that it takes time to reach the graduate level. These candidates remain at the lower level creating the huge shortage of graduate pre-school teachers that Uganda is currently experiencing. Also, because of this anomaly, universities cannot recruit ECD lecturers who are below 35 years old and have a Masters or PhD in ECD. This is the pipeline necessary to create a cadre of senior academics in the subject. Those who do eventually get a Masters in ECD are usually over the age of 40, due to the current hurdles in the ECD career path. They are, therefore, usually already too old to progress to become senior academics and thought leaders in the field. The ECD staff shortage has a ripple effect on caregiver training as the few tutors or lecturers available cannot train the numbers required. The few ECD caregivers/ teachers that are available and trained is not sufficient to cover all pre-schools in Uganda, leading to ECD centres being staffed by untrained personnel, with the result that ECD centres are typified by poor quality learning and teaching.

The above scenario keeps recurring and cannot be addressed unless an ambitious ECD qualifications framework is developed that opens other pathways for ECCE teachers. An inclusive qualifications framework that is both academic and skills-based helps to cater for the two types of role, namely caregivers and teachers. It also provides linkages in the pathways making sure that whoever follows any path benefits from the same training duration and opportunities, and so accesses quality training. It also ensures that ECCE teachers are well-grounded in childcare skills as the training would ideally follow an apprenticeship mode in designated practice centres for the skills-based pathway. The qualification framework will also take care of the currently stranded ECCE teachers and caregivers who find no career pathway available, despite there being a large cadre of these workers who are already well grounded in community and cultural child care practices.

Figure 2: Proposed ECCE teacher and caregiver qualification or skills-based career pathways



who already have related skills to join the profession and receive top-up training. For example, the system should offer an option for an 'A' level mathematics or Bachelor of Science graduate to join the ECCE teacher programme at degree level. Such students have the subject knowledge and so their training can focus on ECCE pedagogy. In contrast, the course for those upgrading from a PLE or even an 'O' level base has to include subject focus as well as ECCE pedagogy. Experience shows that this latter cadre often have a negative attitude to teaching such subjects as numeracy and science, even at pre-school level. The prevailing principle in this revised career and qualification framework is that ECCE teaching and caregiving is made accessible and so should attract more, and better educated, entrants.

Conclusion >>>

Flexible career pathways that cater for the needs of the community as well as making it possible for all interested candidates to go through either an academic or a skills-based track are what is required in Uganda. An apprenticeship mode of training would have the effect of producing ECCE teachers who have the desired quality as perceived by communities, thus leading to sustainability of centres. Once this is in place, Uganda would have a more stable and motivated pre-school cadre of volunteers, assistant teachers, teachers and master trainers, thus laying the foundation for future development of the sector.

Recommendations >>>

In summary, the following recommendations will help in developing a flexible, yet quality ECCE Qualifications Framework for Uganda. They include:

- Adopting a two-track teacher preparation system. The academic track would cater for the academic-oriented teachers, while the skills-based track would cater for those who may find themselves out of the academic track or wish to enter into the profession after obtaining work experience or at a later point in their life. This flexible system mirrors Nepal's Equivalency Programme that provides options for those who drop out of the academic track to join a skills track, with each becoming an entry point to the next academic level (Lamsal, Koiralas & Pant, 2014).
- Reviewing the ECCE teacher training framework to cater for the proposed two tracks of teacher preparation. The curriculum for the two tracks will feed into each other, catering for those who drop out of the academic track as well as creating levels that become entry points back to the academic track for those who may wish to go back.
- Introducing a four-year apprenticeship mode of teacher preparation in the skills-based track, starting with those who have completed the Community Child Care Programme (CCCP) after completing the PLE in Grade 7. This mode would mirror the former Ugandan GII teacher programme that was phased out in the 1980s after the introduction of GIII programme. It has already been proved that more students prefer an apprenticeship mode of training to university education due to the skills and income generated from it (Bruno & Manzo, 2016). This is because, compared to academic equivalents, apprenticeship programmes have been found to increase the probability of finding a job in a number of countries where it is practiced, including Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France (Bertschy,

Cattaneo, & Wolter, 2009). This apprenticeship model can help the trainees to be gain a Child Care Certificate that can be equated to the 'O' level Certificate. The apprenticeship model can be likened to Canada's Seneca College apprenticeship programme. Seneca's model is designed as an in-school training for people already working in the ECCE field who wish to pursue formal studies and receive certification (Kelly, 2017). This will help to ground the teachers with mentorship and teaching skills in the work environment context to improve their skills and the quality of their work. The apprenticeship system also helps teachers to mature and become better role models for our children.

- One institution will have to be identified to oversee the accreditation of ECCE teachers, irrespective of whether they are trained in private or government institutions. Accreditation at one centre, which is at the status of a university as in the case of Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2014) and that can control the curriculum and entry requirements, helps to maintain specific standards and enforce compliance to teacher quality as opposed to allowing many institutions to certify pre-school teachers. The relevant department of the Ministry of Education and Sports (TIE) would remain as the overall policy centre for these institutions.
- Introducing a partnership training mode with skilled caregivers from the community. This partnership would have the effect of bringing communities nearer to the ECCE centres as they see their aspirations for their children instilled into the teachers and caregivers whom they entrust with their children. Also, the partnership enables cultural skills and practices to be passed on from community members to the children through the teachers. When parents see that the schools are preparing children in what they also believe in, they are likely to encourage their children to be in school reducing the culture gap between home and school and so reducing later school drop-out.
- Developing credit accumulation through experience and a credit transfer system that accounts for a person's contribution in the field and work experience as a minimum entry requirement for different levels of education in both the academic and skills-based career tracks. This will enable ECCE practitioners to cross from the skills-based track to the academic track and progress, as in the case of Malaysian Qualification Framework. In Uganda, there is already provision for a mature age entry which starts with those in 'O' level, but could be reinforced by adopting a credit transfer system. The ECD sector could use the approach being taken by the Uganda Vocational Qualifications Framework (UVQF) through the Business, Technical and Vocational Training (BTVE) Act (2008) which provides chances for informal trainees to re-join the formal system after undergoing evidence-based assessments to determine the appropriate level for them to join the formal system.

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Early Childhood Care and Education Think Piece Papers

A Set of ECCE Topics for Consideration in Uganda

