

## Providing universal access to early childhood care and education for 4 – 6 year olds: possibilities and challenges

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### Introduction >>>

This paper discusses the international impetus for scale up of early childhood care and education (ECCE) services, how low and middle-income countries are responding, and key lessons from these experiences that are worth noting for the scale up of ECCE services in Uganda. The addition of an ECCE component to primary schooling, most often in the form of a Grade 0 class, is a prevalent response for increasing access and reducing underage enrolment and retention in the early grades of schooling. While this has been effective in enrolling previously excluded poor and rural children in ECCE services in many countries, quality challenges due to lack of funding, infrastructure, learning materials and suitably trained pre-primary teachers has limited the benefit of such expansion. Building on what exists already in Uganda's ECCE sub-sector which is a mixed model of public and private provision, is the proposed approach that is most likely to be equitable and sustainable.

### The promise of early childhood care and education services >>>

ECCE has been identified as a key strategy for the realisation of children's rights and for addressing poverty and inequality, with research showing that well-designed, quality programmes deliver the greatest benefits for disadvantaged children. In particular, quality ECCE services are seen as helping children become ready for school. ECCE is included in the Sustainable Development Goals. Target 4.2 states that by 2030 countries should: 'ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'. The indicator is the percentage of children 36 – 59 months receiving at least one year of quality pre-primary education. At country level the Ugandan National Development Plan II (NDP II) and Vision 2040 also highlight the need to expand the provision of pre-primary education as the basis for human capital development. These give new urgency for interventions to enable the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) 2007 ECD Policy principle of enhancing equitable access to ECD services for all children. Currently, the 2007 ECD policy and Education Act 13 of 2008 have placed responsibility for ECD service provision with the private sector, which has negatively impacted Uganda's level of access to pre-school by the poor, led to underage enrolment in Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools and is considered to have contributed substantially to the 74% repetition rate in P1 (grade 1) classes.

Like other low and middle-income countries seeking to implement an expanded ECCE programme aimed at equitable access, a key question for the Government of Uganda is how and how quickly to achieve coverage at a level of quality that can deliver improved school readiness given limited resources. Clearly this will require government investment if the poor are to benefit and could be argued on the basis of potential savings for the lower primary education system. In the absence of pre-primary, large numbers of underage children are being enrolled in P1 where they ‘churn’ for several years without learning a great deal before moving on to Grade 2, where they ‘churn’ again in smaller but still significant numbers. From this perspective, enrolling children in pre-primary classes would increase their readiness to learn in school, take the pressure off teachers in the early grades of UPE primary schools, and improve children’s chances of making progress through the school curriculum.

## Pre-primary classes at primary schools >>>

The NDP II mandates expansion of community-based ECD centres and proposes attaching ECD centres to primary schools. This is an ECCE Strategic Objective priority under the National Integrated ECD (NIECD) Action Plan. The National Planning Commission proposes that this public provision could either be in selected primary schools in under-serviced areas or at all primary schools in under-serviced areas, depending on resources. To put this into perspective, in Uganda an estimated 70% of the 2.9 million children aged 3, 4 and 5 years are not yet accessing an ECCE service. At the regulation ratio of 1 teacher to 25 children, universal access would require an additional 102,400 teachers and as many equipped classrooms, plus supervisory and administrative costs.

There is plenty of regional precedent for locating pre-primary classes at primary schools. In Tanzania according to law, all children are guaranteed access to one free year of pre-primary school. All public primary schools must have at least one pre-primary classroom which children may attend free of charge. In Kenya 70% of the approximately 40,000 pre-primary schools are based at primary schools, though it is not compulsory to do so. In Zimbabwe from 2005 all primary schools were directed to attach at least one ECD B class (for 4 – 5 years olds) to prepare for entry into the first year of primary school. In 2006 all primary schools were required to attach another class of ECD A (3 – 4 year olds). This means the two year ECD phase was fully incorporated into the formal primary school system. Attendance is compulsory and children who do not attend will not be admitted to Grade 1. By 2012 98% of primary schools offered ECD classes. Private ECD centres are required to attach themselves to the nearest primary school for professional and administrative assistance from the head teacher of the parent school. Ghana also includes two compulsory years of pre-primary education in their education framework.

## Grade 0 classes >>>

As highlighted in the examples above, the most common approach to increasing access to ECCE is introducing a pre-primary or Grade 0 year within the primary school system. According to the Global Education Monitoring report 2017/18, one-third of countries worldwide legally stipulate at least one year of free provision, 21% one year of compulsory provision and 17% one year both free and compulsory ECCE. In Rwanda the current Education Sector Strategic Plan provides for the introduction of a one year school readiness class for 5 – 6 year olds which will be rolled out across all districts. The ECCE system is being formalised and currently 60% of pre-primary is located at government schools and receives some state support through such inputs as training and teaching and learning materials.

The government of Ethiopia has set the ambitious target of increasing ECCE enrolment from 35% of 4–to-6 year old children in 2015 to 80% by 2020. 0-Classes attached to primary schools have emerged as the most widely available and highest priority due to the ability to utilise an established school site and the ease with which pre-school classes attached to primary schools can be managed within existing federal and regional government structures. A year after the launch of the National Policy Framework for ECCE in 2011/12, 0-Classes enrolled almost three times as many children as had access to ECCE through ECCE centres the year before and the majority of 0-Classes are in rural areas. By 2015 0-Class served 1.9 million young children – 2 in every 3 that attend the pre-primary stage.

The Lancet 2016 Series ‘Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale’ profiles Grade R in South Africa as an example of a scaled up ECD programme that has achieved universal coverage. This free pre-primary class for children aged 4.5 – 6 years was introduced as part of the primary school system in 2001 and enrolment has increased steadily. Close to 1 million children are enrolled and over 94% of children who attended Grade 1 in public primary schools in 2013 had participated in a Grade R class. The highest uptake has occurred in the poorest regions of the country. By 2019 attendance will be compulsory.

## What can be learned from these examples? >>>

While the extent of investment and scale of provision varies across the different country examples, there are a number of issues in common to be considered when embarking on scale up of ECCE services in Uganda. There are two basic aspects to transition from ECCE to primary education - **school readiness** which focuses on the child’s adaptation for primary school and **readiness of schools** which focuses on the accessibility of primary schools and characteristics of the school environment that can encourage or hinder learning. It is clear that there are a number of challenges regarding the readiness of schools for supporting ECCE.

There is no doubt that access has dramatically increased through locating ECCE services at primary schools and that many more poor and rural children have been enrolled where this strategy is in place. Transition to Grade 1 has been easier and underage enrolments have decreased. However, in all cases there have been and still are serious challenges. These echo challenges encountered with the introduction of universal primary education in the region, where there have been great improvements in access but widespread overcrowding, poor attendance rates, drop out, and low achievements on core skills, especially for the most disadvantaged children who often attend the poorest quality schools. There are still access challenges in remote areas where young children may not be able to commute and the cost or absence of transport compounds the problem. The strategy of linking community based centres to primary schools (as practiced in Zimbabwe and South Africa) builds on the administrative and oversight advantage of ECCE centres located at primary schools, and facilitates access to pre-primary provision even where there is no primary school.

**Access does not mean access to quality** especially in the context of limited resources. While one of the advantages given of location of ECCE services at primary schools is use of existing infrastructure, severe shortages of suitable infrastructure – classrooms, water and sanitation – are widely reported in all countries. Primary school structures, play areas and sanitation are seldom suitable for younger children. In South Africa 1000 new classrooms a year had to be built to accommodate the 6.1% increase in enrolment each year.

A lack of suitably qualified teachers is a problem in all the country examples, as is the need to increase training supply especially in rural areas, and to bridge paraprofessionals who meet entry requirements into teacher training. Location in primary schools tends to lead to inappropriate

teaching methods which are a downwards extension of academic learning rather than child centred, holistic learning programmes. Shortages of teaching and learning materials contribute to the problem. Increased service demand has led to overcrowding, greatly exceeding teacher pupil ratios in many cases.

Inadequate government spending on ECCE contributes to all of the above problems. In South Africa significant investments were made for learner support material, teacher training, teacher stipends, increased education department staff at national and provincial levels, and physical infrastructure. In 2011/12 this amounted to US\$243 per child per annum and even with this degree of investment it has taken nearly 20 years to reach universal provision. South Africa is close to reaching its target of universalisation of Grade 0 with teachers on the school payroll. Spending on the programme was over US\$ 278 million for 2016/17.

## Access without quality yields poor returns >>>

The overwhelming international evidence is that good learning outcomes are dependent on good quality ECCE provision. While there have been very promising results from quality pre-primary interventions and especially for poor children, studies confirm the challenges and small or fade out effects of Grade 0 classes that lack sufficient quality.

In South Africa the introduction of a Grade R class in public primary schooling has shown modest effects through the primary school grades, which do not decline with time. However, despite the considerable investment, the advantage amounts to what the average learner should learn in 12 days of mathematics or 50 days of instruction for home language. In the lower quintile schools (in the poorest areas) there was in most cases no significant effect on test performance unless they were in regions where there was a well-functioning education system. In other words, programmes such as Grade 0 provision provide greater benefits when implemented within a well-functioning education system, even in the poorer schools. Since this study was undertaken, a Grade R improvement plan including attention to teacher training, working conditions, materials and curriculum has been put in place.

In Kenya average school readiness scores measured on the Tayari School Readiness Index<sup>1</sup> of expected school readiness competence were 50% or below in both public and private ECCE centres. This was attributed to a focus on direct instruction rather than time devoted to individual children or group work to encourage children to work independently and cooperatively.

The benefits to participants in Tennessee's pre-kindergarten programme, which had relatively low scores on classroom quality, found much smaller initial cognitive and social-emotional benefits to children after one year of pre-school, which were no longer apparent one year later compared to those in pre-kindergarten programmes with higher classroom quality scores.

The implication is clear. Expansion in coverage needs to be linked to a quality development strategy including the development of pre-primary teacher capacity. If governments push ahead too quickly in low resource contexts, children may be enrolled in low quality ECCE settings and then progress to low quality primary classes for very little gain on the investment. Given high costs, targeting of the poorest, hardest to reach and most vulnerable is important.

<sup>1</sup>Tayari ECDE is a four-year Kenya Ministry of Education pilot to improve school readiness. The Index measures numeracy, literacy, letter knowledge and executive functioning important to school readiness.

## Possible directions for ECCE in Uganda >>>

In 2015 the National Planning Commission proposed getting the fundamentals right by enforcing delivery standards for ECCE, integrating teacher training into the Government's Primary Teachers' Colleges and improvements to the curriculum, while increasing provision through targeted or broader provision of ECCE at primary schools in poor areas. Regional and international experience of pre-primary scale up has taken this approach. However, other international scale up experience talks to the importance of building on what exists and combining private providers and public finance as a mechanism for enabling expansion, particularly where resources are limited. For all the reasons discussed, reliance on a single model for expansion would be risky and potentially contribute to continuing inequity by advantaging primary schools in better off urban areas.

Uganda has a substantial and growing private sector, which needs to be incentivised, regulated and supported. Instead of relying on primary schools alone, a mixed model including some public and incentivised private provision is likely to be more effective. A subsidy scheme on a per child basis for community and non-profit providers who are targeting the poorest children could be one option for using existing infrastructure to increase access more quickly.

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A Set of ECCE Topics for Consideration in Uganda

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