MONITORING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PRACTICES

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS FROM PILOTING THE BRIEF EARLY CHILDHOOD QUALITY INVENTORY IN THE GAMBIA, UGANDA, AND ZAMBIA

INTRODUCTION

The **Brief Early Childhood Quality Inventory (BEQI)** was designed to help early childhood systems monitor and improve the use of evidence-based practices. It is an adaptable tool that helps measure the quality of early childhood settings. Some highlights of the tool include:

- The BEQI observation tool is streamlined and easy-to-use, scored on a yes/no scale.
- BEQI is adaptable and can be modified to fit the needs of a country or organization. It is applicable across different setting types. To date, BEQI has been used in the US, Colombia, Liberia, Guinea Bissau, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, The Gambia, Zambia, Portugal, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Egypt, and Denmark.
- Compared to other tools focused primarily on research. BEQI can be used for monitoring over time.
- BEQI focuses on specific evidence-based behaviors and practices (such as giving children choice, book reading, talking about feelings, etc.- see more on this in section below).

In 2023, ECD Measure and Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN) partnered together to pilot the BEQI in The Gambia, Uganda, and Zambia to explore how countries define, measure, and improve quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) implementation. ECD Measure worked closely with three teams nominated by the respective Ministries of Education in each country, comprised of Ministerial representatives from curriculum, standards and inspection departments, as well as local university partners, and other early childhood stakeholders interested in early childhood quality monitoring processes. Our joint goal of the three-country BEQI pilot was to promote measurement of early childhood education and produce reliable, actionable data on the quality of early learning environments.

The BEQI classroom observation tool was aligned and adapted to national early learning quality standards for The Gambia, Uganda, and Zambia. National stakeholders reviewed and validated the contextualized BEQI tools for their respective countries. The BEQI observation tool was then piloted in 20-30 ECCE classrooms in each country in September-October 2023.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

Building upon existing research on quality in early childhood, BEQI addresses the need for simpler ways to gather context-specific evidence on quality in early childhood environments. A key principle behind BEQI is that it is adaptable, and countries can select items based on the goals and priorities of their context. While the definition or priorities of ECCE quality can vary across countries and context, there are core evidence-based practices related to child development and learning. BEQI is based on global early childhood research that shows young children learn better when educators encourage them to engage directly with materials, give children choice in their activities and use of materials, involve children in discussion that extend their understanding of the concepts, and ensure that strong relationships and secure emotional bonds are built in the classroom. The BEQI tool looks at evidence-based practices that are organized into the following areas: (a) play-based learning; (b) learning through conversation; (c) promoting strong relationships; and (d) safe and stimulating environments.

PLAY-BASED LEARNING

Play-based learning is characterized by child choice, child-directed activities, free play, and activities that extend children's learning. Children learn best through play to make sense of their world. In early childhood classrooms, allowing children to choose how to engage in activities and time for free play are features of autonomy support, or the extent to which children are supported in following their own interests and leading their own learning. Early play experiences set the stage for subsequent development and prompt children to expand and integrate concepts and skills across all developmental domains.[1] Furthermore, the quality of the play context (which includes space and materials) is highly associated with children's social problem solving. [2]

LEARNING THROUGH CONVERSATION

Early childhood language environments are essential for children's development. Children who hear more language and participate in more verbal exchanges with adults have higher cognition later in childhood and adolescence.[3,4] Asking children open-ended questions and engaging them in back-and-forth dialogue also promotes their problem solving skills and language development and understanding.[5] Making links and connection to a child's world (i.e., asking questions or making comments that help the child make connections between the text and their experiences) emphasizes critical language and vocabulary skills.[6] Finally, shared and interactive book reading with young children significantly enhances the rate of their vocabulary growth and their overall oral language development. It is consistently ranked as the most impactful activity on preschoolers' literacy development both at home and at school.[7]

PROMOTING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Positive interactions between teachers and children is often a strong indicator of high-quality programs. During early childhood, children learn social skills in interacting with others, including their ability to share, compromise, and negotiate. Friendship and positive peer interactions are a very powerful aid to the development of social competence.[8] Resilience, self-perception and value, and children's cognitive self-regulation can be supported in the ECCE setting by the creation of an environment by adult educators in which there are caring relationships, positive emotional climate, clear behavioral expectations, and meaningful engagement of the adults with the children.[9,10]

## SAFE AND STIMULATING ENVIRONMENTS

The classroom environment needs to be both safe for children while being able to stimulate play-based learning. ECCE programs need to be able to provide a minimum amount of safety, sanitation, and functionality in terms of space available in order to meet the developmental needs of young children.[11]

BEQI PILOT RESULTS

Below, key takeaways from the BEQI pilot results are highlighted to demonstrate the use of evidence-based practices in ECCE classrooms. Data were collected in 70 preprimary classrooms in The Gambia (30 classrooms), Uganda (20 classrooms) and Zambia (20 classrooms). In reviewing these results, it is important to note that data are not from representative samples and should not be interpreted to draw any general conclusions on pre-primary classrooms in these countries or the region.

PLAY-BASED LEARNING

97%
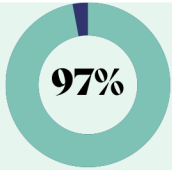
Almost all classroom activities are teacher-led.
While some teacher-directed activities can support school readiness, child-directed activities are also important for children's self-regulation and engagement in learning.

In 3 out of 10 classrooms, children have open play time
Giving children free open play time helps them learn to self-regulate and allows them to follow their own interests and lead their own learning.

Pretend play occurs in 24% of classrooms

24%

Pretend play supports: language, speech, and literacy development; social skills, friendships, and emotional well-being; and creativity.

50% of teachers use concrete materials when leading activities or teaching

50%

Using materials to teach makes the teaching-learning process effective and meaningful for students. The use of instructional materials often is helpful in teaching new concepts and brings life to learning by stimulating students to learn.

Most children engage with writing materials; few children engage with pretend play or blocks

Percent of classroms

	Writing utensils	Fantasy materials	Blocks	Math materials
Children use	57%	11%	10%	29%
Present not used	17%	66%	70%	46%
No materials present	26%	23%	20%	26%

■Children use ■No materials present ■Present not used
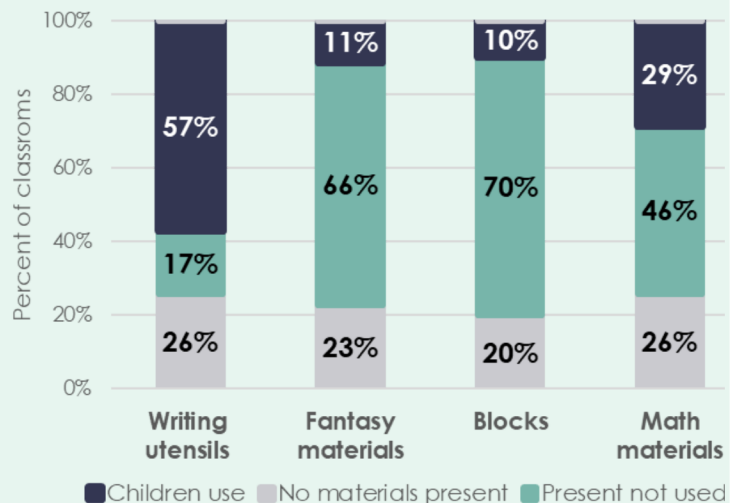
Using materials supports early understanding of the features of objects and supports grasping abstract concepts and practical problem-solving. Materials help children represent their ideas and understandings about their world.

In 2 out of 10 classrooms, children work in pairs or small groups

Small group work gives children the opportunity to collaboratively engage in problem-solving and work on social interactions while 1-on-1 time allows teachers to focus on individual needs.

**In 5 out of 10 classrooms, children work one-on-one with the educator**

Most teachers lead literacy activities; less lead math and science

Percent of classrooms

- Literacy Activity: 70%
- Math Activity: 54%
- Science Activity: 17%
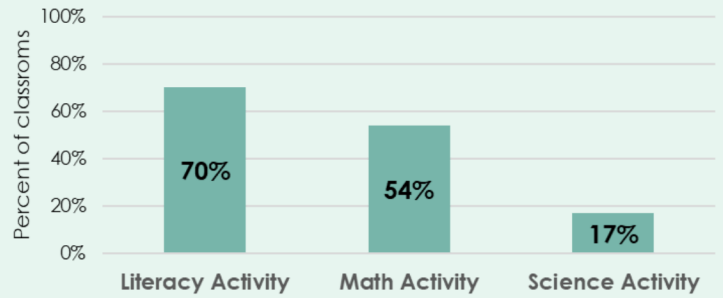
Intentional time spent on learning activities, particularly literacy, math, and science, leads to greater learning gains at the start of primary school.

LEARNING THROUGH CONVERSATION

Classrooms have limited books; books are rarely read or looked at by children or teachers

- 15-24 books 12.9%
- 25+ books 2.9%
- 0 books 11.4%
- 1-14 books 72.9%
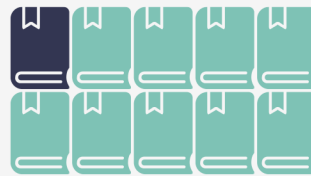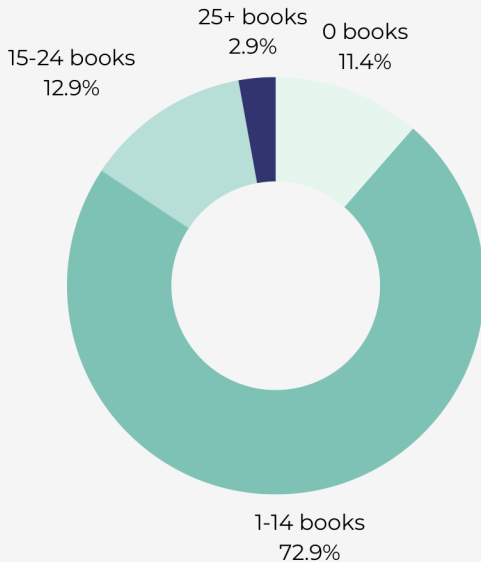
In 1 out of 10 classrooms, children look at books on their own

7%

7% of teachers read books out loud

Providing a literacy rich environment, reading books aloud and encouraging children to look at books on their own helps foster a joy for reading and sets the foundation for supporting a young child's oral language development.

Children have the opportunity to express themselves in 27% of classrooms

27%

Providing children with opportunities to talk and ask questions helps to develop their language and conversation skills, express their thoughts, ask for help, and learn from adults and one another.

Only some teachers are engaging children in dialogue and promoting conversations with children

Percent of classrooms

- Teachers ask open-ended questions: 23%
- Teachers engage in discussion: 30%
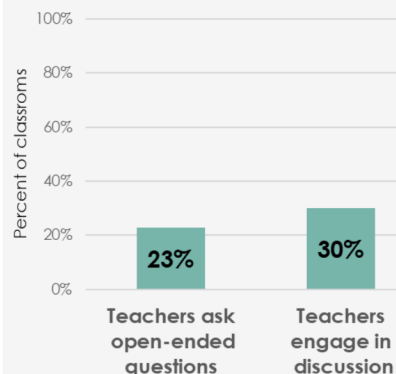
To stimulate verbal exchanges and discussions, the best questions are those that draw children out and prompt them to elaborate (known as open-ended questions.)

PROMOTING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

### Most teachers provide individualized feedback to children

57%

Giving feedback to children not only helps them grow and develop new skills but it helps increase their self-worth and fosters their social and emotional development.

26% of teachers talk about feelings

Talking to children about emotions helps them learn to manage their feelings and impulses during their early years and to put names to their emotions to help better express themselves.

39% of teachers get on children's level

39%
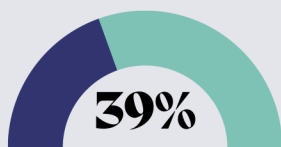
Being on the same level helps children feel connected and communicates that the teacher is paying attention to them.

In 10% of classrooms, children share their personal experiences

Encouraging children to share their personal experiences, creates strong social-emotional bonds with children by getting to know them better and helping them to feel like they belong.

Teachers use effective behavior management strategies in most classrooms

80%
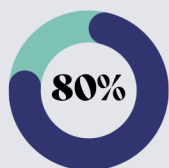
80% of teachers acknowledge positive behaviors

86%

86% of teachers actively reengage children when needed

By acknowledging positive behaviors and keeping children engaged, teachers are helping to increase positive behaviors in the classroom and decrease negative behaviors. This can lead to increases in positive peer interactions, following adult directions, and self-regulation skills.

STIMULATING AND SAFE ENVIRONMENTS

Most environments have adequate space, but some lack outdoor equipment; teachers could use support in organizing materials into learning areas or stations.

Percent of classrooms

Learning stations	Appropriate writing surface	Adequate indoor learning space	Outdoor equipment
33%	94%	79%	53%
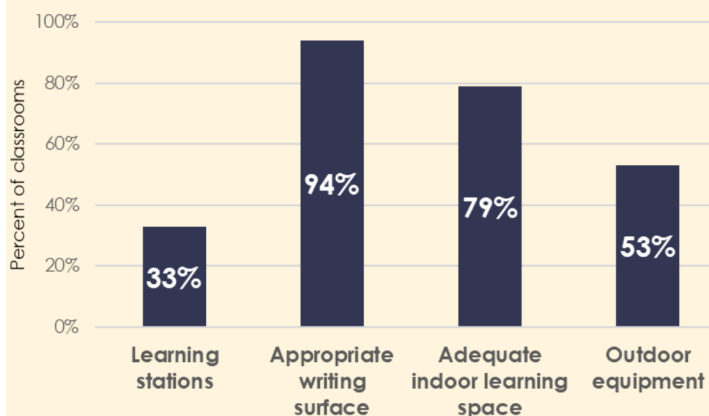
In general, classrooms meet basic safety and sanitation standards but improvements could be made in handwashing practices.

Percent of classrooms

Safe drinking water	Access to toilets	Hand-washing	Soap available	Safe buildings/grounds
91%	97%	57%	44%	77%

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