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RESEARCH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

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Promoting Evidence-based Decision Making for Early Childhood Education

Together for Early Childhood Evidence Country Research Projects

Jem Heinzl-Nelson Alvarenga Lima, Rebecca Sayre Mojgani, Abbie Raikes, ECD Measure

Key Messages

- Together for Early Childhood Evidence provided country grants in Ethiopia, Liberia, Rwanda and South Africa to support local research activities to build data-driven early childhood education (ECE) systems.
- Teams worked together to identify their own research priorities to address specific country-level needs related to ECE data and measurement.
- These country-driven research initiatives were effective in building local capacity to collect and use early childhood data and strengthen linkages between research, practice, and policy-making.
- The projects promoted evidence-based decision-making for ECE and data feedback loops, which in turn can lead to greater impact for ECE investments and higher-quality services for children and families.

Introduction

Together for Early Childhood Evidence is an initiative funded by USAID to accelerate progress toward data-driven early childhood education systems in sub-Saharan Africa. The consortium convenes policymakers, researchers and other early learning experts to explore how the use and application of data can lead to positive change in ECE systems and to accelerate country-level action to improve young children's early learning experiences.

In 2021 and 2022, Together for Early Childhood Evidence provided four country grants in Ethiopia, Liberia, Rwanda and South Africa to support local research activities to inform programmatic and policy decisions facing early childhood education (ECE). These projects brought together policymakers, researchers and practitioners committed to testing and applying new approaches to data use. This brief summarizes the four country-led research activities addressing gaps in data-driven decision making in sub-Saharan Africa.

Ethiopia: ECCE Knowledge Hub

What was the ECE data/evidence problem to be addressed?

In Ethiopia, numerous agencies and organizations work in early childhood care and education (ECCE), resulting in the development of a significant amount of resources, materials, and research. However, there is a general lack of coordination between stakeholders. Often the resources developed remain localized and inaccessible to other partners, resulting in overlap and repetition of work. Multiple investments are made by donors and partners to recreate already existing resources leading to inefficiencies within the system.

How did the team seek to solve this?

Under this project, a multidisciplinary team of researchers from Addis Ababa University, the Ministry of Education, and Ethiopian School Readiness Initiative created an online Knowledge Hub for the exchange of information, experiences, and resources from stakeholders throughout Ethiopia involved in ECCE. This online platform creates a foundation for collaboration and sharing. It encourages academic partners, government officials, and practitioners to access and disseminate existing evidence and resources on early childhood access and quality in Ethiopia.

What were the results?

The research team collected almost 500 unique ECCE resources across multiple sectors from government ministries, universities, research institutes, assessment centers, and local, national, and international (bilateral and multilateral) organizations. The ECCE Knowledge Hub is hosted on the Addis Ababa University (AAU) website, where the materials and resources can easily be retrieved and are publicly available. Under this project, resources were only collected within Addis, but the team hopes future funding could allow for the expansion of the collection of resources throughout Ethiopia.

How will this data be used to effect change?

Given the numerous ECCE partners and initiatives throughout Ethiopia, there is great value in bringing together and sharing best practices, research outputs, tools/measures and datasets. Creating a repository of shared resources will create a continuous data feedback loop system to advance knowledge and practices in ECCE in Ethiopia. The mutual sharing of data among academics, policymakers and practitioners will encourage integrated services and research, thereby reducing

unnecessary duplication of efforts. This will create opportunities for improved coordination among stakeholders to build upon best practices and collaborate to advance quality ECDE in Ethiopia.

Liberia: ECE Program Quality Catalogue

What was the ECE data/evidence problem to be addressed?

While access to early childhood programs has improved significantly over the past decade, the Ministry of Education of Liberia has had little information and data on the location, status, and quality conditions of ECE programs throughout the country. This results in uneven distribution of service provision and varying levels of quality and program interventions, leading to disparity in access, and overutilization or underutilization of educational facilities.

How did the team seek to solve this?

Under this project, researchers from the University of Liberia and the Liberian Ministry of Education designed a study to capture information about public, private, community, and faith-based Early Childhood Education centers and schools in the three pilot regions of Liberia. The team adapted and used the Brief Early Childhood Quality Inventory (BEQI) classroom observation and teacher interview instruments to gather information on structural and process components of quality. The team also geographically mapped each ECE center.

What were the results?

The study achieved two goals. First, it captured key information on ECE programs in pilot

regions, including location, teacher characteristics, and a snapshot of quality indicators in an ECE Program Quality Catalogue. Second, the study identified important quality-related issues for ECE in Liberia. The study showed that schools often do not have sufficient indoor or outdoor infrastructure to support learning. The data revealed that few play-based activities or practices are being implemented in Liberian ECE classrooms. Children were observed having almost no choice in how to engage in activities; instead, they were mainly involved in whole group activities, and had few opportunities to interact with their peers. Data from the teacher interview showed that many pre-primary teachers are satisfied with their jobs; however they believe they need additional support and training. Further, 40 percent of pre-primary teachers do not have certification in teaching kindergarten and 60 percent of public-school teachers did not receive in-service training within the last year.

How will this data be used to effect change?

This project marks an important step towards mapping ECE centers and identifying gaps in the implementation of ECE programs. This study can be used by the Ministry of Education, its partners, and school administrators to identify the types of facilities and infrastructure that are needed in each ECE school/center. The study results can also be used to develop strategies to train ECE teachers to ensure all children have access to quality and equitable education to develop lifelong learning skills.

The research team hopes that the Ministry of Education can use this experience to scale up a nationwide study for a comprehensive picture of ECE programs in Liberia. As Liberia continues to learn more about the status and current conditions of their ECE programs, opportunities will arise to leverage those data towards ongoing program improvement, capacity building, supporting the workforce and

improving child outcomes through data-driven policies and approaches.

Rwanda: Measuring Classroom Quality

What was the ECE data/evidence problem to be addressed?

The Ministry of Education of Rwanda has made improving the quality of pre-primary education a priority; they have developed an official pre-primary curriculum, established quality standards and have designated staff to inspect and monitor schools. However, there is limited data on the quality of the classroom environment to guide decision making. The current monitoring system does not include the collection of data on the quality of teaching and learning in pre-primary classrooms and inspectors are not trained in this area.

How did the team seek to solve this?

Under the Together for Early Childhood Evidence project, the team expanded the scope of an ongoing International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) study to i) enhance quantitative data about the quality of pre-primary classroom environments using the IDELA Classroom Environment (IDELA-CE) tool, and ii) build the capacity of government officials to monitor quality pre-primary learning environments. This project trained government officials in how to i) assess the quality of pre-primary learning environments using the IDELA-CE and ii) use the findings and data to improve students' experiences and learning.

What were the results?

The IDELA study found that higher quality classrooms were associated with the presence of more experienced teachers, longer length of

support from a non-governmental organization (Save the Children, in this case), and presence of a nutrition program at the school. In addition, higher quality classrooms were associated with stronger learning and development skills for children. Resources and teaching related to literacy and numeracy, as well as interactions between teachers and children were most highly correlated with children's skills. Classrooms rated as having poor quality were associated with particularly low student learning scores.

The project also effectively built capacity in government officials to collect and use data on pre-primary quality. For many of the government officials trained and involved in the IDELA-CE data collection, this was their first time in an ECE classroom. Anecdotal evidence demonstrated that this experience helped them to better understand how young children learn (through play) and the challenges faced by teachers including a high teacher: student ratio, insufficient learning materials, and lack of required skills to support children's learning and development.

How will this data be used to effect change?

Prior to implementing the IDELA-CE, data on quality of preprimary classrooms was scarce. Now, building on this experience and leveraging the strengthened coordination and data use by government officials, results and findings from the report can help to shape policy recommendations and interventions to address areas of need.

In addition, the involvement and capacity building of local officials to collect and utilize classroom-level data has helped to shape a more positive data-use culture in Rwanda. The data has helped local education officers to better direct resources, budgets, and organize teacher training based on identified areas of need. Recognizing the importance of quality

early childhood programming and the use of data, many district officials have committed to continue including ECE classroom observation in their ongoing monitoring plans and to expand this training to other staff in their districts.

“I did not know the extent of need in my district. Our classrooms lack a lot in terms of quality of the environment, but I now have the data I can use for advocacy on increased funding. We will now go to budgeting and planning meetings with credible information on what is needed on the ground.”

-Government official from Rwanda involved in the Together for Early Childhood Evidence Research project

South Africa: Thrive by Five Index

What was the ECE data/evidence problem to be addressed?

In South Africa, there are 1.3 million children aged 4-5 years. Seventy-two percent of these children attend some type of early learning programme (ELP). Even though a majority of South African children attend ELPs, up until recently, limited systematic information was available about the diverse ELPs in the country or the outcomes for children who attend them. There were no national data or a system to monitor and report child outcomes trends over time, and to help understand correlations between children’s sex, socio-economic status, growth, social and emotional development, exposure to an ELP, and learning outcomes.

How did the team seek to solve this?

The Thrive by Five Index 2021 is the largest survey of preschool child outcomes ever attempted in South Africa. It is the first in a series of surveys that will monitor trends over time in the proportion of children enrolled in ELPs who are “On Track” for their age in key areas of development. The Index was initiated by First National Bank and Innovation Edge, in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education (DBE), with support from USAID and Together for Early Childhood Evidence.

What were the results?

The Thrive by Five Index reports that 65% of children attending an ELP in South Africa fail to Thrive by Five. These children are not “On Track” for cognitive and/or physical development and face barriers to thriving, which limit their chances of realizing their full potential. Fifty-five percent of children attending ELPs are not able to do the learning tasks expected of children their age. Twenty-five percent of children showed signs of stunting. Data showed a clear socio-economic gradient: as household income increases, so does the child’s chances of being on track. By age 4 years, a child from the lowest income group who is severely stunted is already one full year behind a child of normal growth in the wealthiest income group.

How will this data be used to effect change?

The Thrive by Five Index was formally launched in April 2022 as part of a broader initiative to use data tools and insights to help change the educational trajectories of disadvantaged children in South Africa. The intention is to repeat data collection every three years, in order to be able to track trends in the proportion of 4- to 5-year-old children who are developmentally “On Track”, and to respond accordingly to priority needs within specific

domains, population groups or geographies. Data from the Index will be used to report on the Sustainable Development Goal 4.2.1, and to ultimately raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development, motivate for greater resources and more effective targeting, support data-informed systems enhancements and improve routine data collection systems and performance monitoring in order to give children the foundations for lifelong success.

Key Take-Aways

As noted through these projects, country-driven research grants can be effective mechanisms to build local capacity in early childhood evidence collection and use. Several notable themes emerged from the Together for Early Childhood Evidence country projects that could inform future work to support data and evidence uptake in early childhood systems.

Intentional data feedback loops are critical to ensure accessibility and use of data.

Data can be used at each level of an ECE system to influence change in behavior or decision-making. In order to effect change, data must be actionable and accessible to stakeholders at all levels (parents, teachers, schools, communities, national decision-makers, global players for accountability). Each country project had intentional links to use data on quality and access to ECE so that it was accessible and actionable for decision-makers.

The 2021 Thrive by Five Index in South Africa is just the start of an ongoing data feedback loop in which data will be collected every three years to track trends and adjust programming and policies accordingly. In Liberia, data is already being used to inform the design of the ECE

teacher training curriculum under a USAID TESTS grant.

A culture of data communication and data use is needed.

Taskforce teams have reflected on the importance of clearly communicating the purpose of collecting and using data in advance. It is important to clearly communicate to stakeholders (particularly teachers and those at the local level) that data are not being collected to police or penalize. Similarly, teams have identified the need to use common language in sharing data and results. When researchers present, they often use academic language, creating a disconnect between those people who are on-the-ground and supposed to use the data for quality improvements. As part of the efforts to create a culture of data, teams are focusing on the way they introduce, communicate and present data so that people understand it's focused on improving learning and quality and not on penalizing.

In Rwanda, the team worked closely with local government officials and trained them in understanding and utilizing data to help with decision making and working directly with teachers at the local level. In South Africa, the team worked closely with a communication partner to ensure that the data and findings were communicated in clear manner accessible to all levels of stakeholders and developed "Action Briefs" to highlight concrete steps to be taken to address the challenges.

Direct linkages between research, practice, and policy are imperative.

The four research activities demonstrate effective collaboration between local researchers and those who use the data to make decisions. Local researchers have intentionally collaborated with government

officials in the design and implementation of their research.

In Rwanda, government officials are involved in data collection efforts on classroom quality. In Liberia, the Assistant Minister for Early Childhood Education and team provided technical inputs throughout the process and were involved in the development of the data collection instruments and items to be used in the Catalogue. In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education is directly involved in the audit of early learning programs. In Ethiopia, the National Educational Assessment and Examinations Agency, an agency within the Ministry of Education, supported data collection efforts and co-hosts the Knowledge Hub with Addis Ababa University.

Data should respond to and contribute to national ECE priorities.

Local data and evidence can help governments track progress over time and prioritize investments to areas most in need. Each research activity is designed to generate demand-driven data that responds to needs within the government's overall vision and plans for ECE. The research activities in all four countries are sparking momentum on the ground, as they bring together diverse partners to work on tangible projects and engage in dialogue around improving the use of early childhood data.

In Ethiopia, the lack of coordination between stakeholders and fragmentation of resources and interventions is noted as a key challenge in their Education Sector Plan. The Knowledge Hub responds directly to this priority by creating a foundation for collaboration and sharing between stakeholders. In Liberia, the project is the first attempt at developing an organized system for the government to survey and capture key components of quality in programs throughout the country.

Building local capacity for data collection and use is key for ownership and sustainability.

A key feature of the Together for Early Childhood Evidence consortium is that it builds capacity of local researchers and implementers in sub-Saharan Africa to gather and use their own data to improve national ECE systems. Data collection is often outsourced to firms or international organizations. However, early childhood data systems are most likely to have high impact when local stakeholders are in the driver's seat. The four research activities were designed by and implemented by local researchers, with direct inputs from country-level policymakers.

In Rwanda, Save the Children intentionally trained local officials in the use of the data collection tools to build ownership around the process. In Liberia the team was led by a consortium of both local university researchers and government officials who were involved in the design of the instruments, the data collection process and data analysis.

Conclusion

Data and evidence on ECE are essential for improving pre-primary policies and programs. The commendable efforts of the four Together for Early Childhood Evidence country research teams have demonstrated how data and evidence can be gathered and synthesized to strengthen national ECE systems. While there remains much work to be done to ensure all children have access to quality pre-primary, these activities have contributed to progress toward more data-driven ECE systems in sub-Saharan Africa.

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