

Investing against evidence ^[1]

The global state of early childhood care and education

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Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Format: Book / booklet

Publication Date: 31 Dec 2014

AVAILABILITY

Full book PDF ^[2]

Foreword

This book is part of UNESCO's Education on the Move series which was created to provide policy-makers, educators and other stakeholders with state-of-the-art analyses of topical issues. Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is one of these contemporary issues requiring close attention given its critical role in laying the foundation for lifelong learning and development, and in closing the achievement gaps between the disadvantaged and advantaged.

ECCE has had somewhat an ambiguous place within the education sector. Ministries of education have often limited their purview to one or two years of preschool provision prior to primary schooling, while other ministries cover the provision for younger children's care and protection. Generally, these provisions evolved separately without policy and programmatic coordination. Preschool programmes in the past were often considered either 'luxury' or an 'unserious business' where children played under adults' supervision.

However, this is changing.

Owing particularly to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, young children have become explicitly defined as right-holders. Indeed, regardless of their age, children have rights, including the right to adequate education. Moreover, the principle of the indivisibility of rights, which is fundamental to international conventions and human rights treaties, has given support to cross-sectoral approaches to promoting human development and well-being.

The notions of learning beginning at birth and of ECCE as an integral part of basic education – inscribed in the 1990 Jomtien Declaration on Education for All (EFA) and reflected in the first EFA goal within the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action – were also significant in broadening the education agenda. They have given rise to a multitude of efforts, including the 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report Strong Foundations and the 2010 World Conference on ECCE, Building the Wealth of Nations, organized by UNESCO in cooperation with the Russian Federation and partner organizations.

A decisive push toward heightening attention to ECCE by education stakeholders may be the mounting research evidence on its benefits for children's capacities, educational achievement and life prospects.

Brain development is most remarkable in early childhood. Providing supportive conditions for early learning and development is more effective and less costly than trying to remedy the consequences of early adversities later. With quality ECCE, children are healthy, happy and curious, and well prepared for primary school. They achieve more and grow into successful lifelong learners. Through its compensatory effects, ECCE helps children from disadvantaged backgrounds to have an equally strong start in school and in life. The best results are gained when ECCE caters to the child's holistic development – facilitated by multisectoral collaboration – and provides developmentally and contextually relevant educational experiences.

Thus, ECCE is unambiguously a key concern for education stakeholders. It is a critical starting point in realizing equitable, quality education and lifelong learning – an aspiration framing the post-2015 global education agenda.

This book features these and other lessons from research and experience from different continents. Its thematic orientation addressing investment rationales, equity and quality reflects that of the World Conference on ECCE.

It argues for reversing the trend of 'investing against evidence' so that children – especially the disadvantaged ones – and societies can reap the proven benefits of quality ECCE. The current picture is still sobering: 6.3 million children died before their fifth birthday in 2013. Sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia are home to three-quarters of the world's malnourished children. A wide pre-primary enrolment gap exists between the richest and poorest. Across world regions, the disadvantaged are least served by quality ECCE, despite the fact that they benefit most from such intervention. Pre-primary tends to be allocated the lowest level of public education funding among other levels.

UNESCO is sincerely grateful for the contribution by the authors, who are leading researchers, thinkers and professionals in the field of

ECCE, as well as for the time and efforts taken by numerous peer reviewers.

[Signed by]

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