

## ACCESS AND EQUITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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The world conference on Education for all EFA of 1980 laid a lot of emphasis on the significance of early childhood years as the foundation of life for an individual. Access and equity in the provision of education at this level has remained a challenge in the context of poverty. This paper was based on the theoretical reflections on how early childhood has been implemented in Kenya and the challenges uncounted with regard to access and equity. The paper reviewed some studies that had been done in the area of childhood education in Kenya. This review sought to highlight how early childhood has been interpreted and implemented by the ministry of education in Kenya. International protocols and conventions as well as national policies and legislations such as the United Nations Convention on Human Rights (1948), Jomtein Declaration of Education for all (1990), Dakar Declaration of Education for All (2000), Millennium Development Goals, Children's Act (2001), the New Constitution of Kenya and the Sustainable Development Goals all state that every child is entitled to basic rights among which education is key.

**Keywords:** Access, equity, early childhood education, challenges and opportunities

### Introduction

Article 26, sub-section 1 of the United Nations Convention on Human Rights of 1948 states that, everyone has the right to education, which shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Similarly, the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) that took place in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990, articulated the significance of the early years as the foundation for the life of an individual. It also emphasized that basic education starts long before primary school. The Dakar Declaration for Education for All (2000) called on the national governments to take full responsibility for ensuring that its goals and strategies are implemented. Education for all is the obligation and prerogative of the State. In working towards this goal, the Dakar Framework urges governments to establish broad-based partnerships with civil society and to give the ensuing national action plans the strongest political support.

The government of Kenya in the year 2006 developed a policy framework to enhance the achievement of these global goals on education. This national policy depicted an overarching comprehensive frame-

work that encompassed sector policies for early childhood services and programs in Kenya for children from conception to eight years. It delineated the Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy system and provided a frame of reference for key sectors involved in the provision of services for infants and children.

This comprehensive policy would form the springboard from which other sector policies would be strengthened, developed or reviewed, particularly in areas of health and nutrition, education, water and sanitation, and social services. These sector policies are crucial in providing standards and guidelines for ensuring provision of quality services for all children in their earliest years. According to this policy framework, Early Childhood Education in Kenya concerns itself with holistic development of children between 0+ and 5+ years old. The government, parents, communities and private sector like religious organisations, private companies, NGOs, CBOs, and individuals are the main sources of ECDE finance and Support (Government of Kenya, 2006).

### Objectives of Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) in Kenya

The first six years of life are extremely important because:

1. The environmental experiences during this

period are significant in influencing one's life. The experiences of this period are known to either enhance or inhibit realization of one's potential in life.

2. This is also the fastest period of growth and development in all aspects.
3. The development of the brain is most rapid in the early years. By the second year of life the brain of the child is 70% of an adult brain. By six years of age it reaches 90% of its adult weight and size. In addition, by the end of six years the brain of the child has developed maximum connections, more than an individual will require in a lifetime. All that is left is to make these connections permanent through providing early stimulation and quality care.
4. All the "critical windows of opportunity" are open during this period. These are the periods when children are able to learn and acquire certain knowledge, skills and attitudes very quickly with minimal effort. Parents, other care givers and teachers need to make use of this period in order to maximize children's holistic development and, therefore, their potential in life.
5. This is the period when the brain is most malleable and also highly impressionable. Environmental influences, especially care, nurture and stimulation, have the greatest impact on the brain.
6. This is the period when it is very easy to mould the character of children by inculcating social norms, values and habits as well as regulation and control of emotions.
7. This is a vital period for ensuring proper physiological growth and a crucial period for significant health and nutrition interventions to put the child on the right track for life.

### **Factors that Affect Access and Equity of ECDE in Kenya**

Access refers to opportunity to enroll and participate in learning in an ECE center, it equally means the right to education. It is the opportunity provided for children to be educated, access therefore deals with availability, convenience and ability to be educated. The goal of ECDE in Kenya is to enhance access, equity and quality services for all children from conception to six years. This access should promote sur-

vival, growth and development in all children (Kenya Institute of Education, 2006).

Below are some of the factors that affect access to early childhood education in Kenya.

#### **a) Distance from Home to School**

Several studies have pointed to distance from Home to School as a key factor that influence access to ECDE in Kenya. According to study carried out by UNESCO (2005), the proximity and access to regular school was determining factor on enrolment and transition. If distance between schools and home is far it may make education delivery difficult. Distance between schools and home affects young children because parents are afraid to let the young ones walk alone and they may be kept out of school unless there was someone to accompany them (Githinji & Kanga, 2011). Geographical distance between schools and homes results from sparse distribution of the population. Sparse population distribution is a significant obstacle limiting children's attendance in school.

Low population density makes it difficult to gather enough pupils' population forcing schools to be distant apart for them to be cost effective. Research done in Ethiopia also pointed out that distance from home to school is an important factor in education access particularly in rural areas (Agembo & Cheptoo, 2017). The greater the distance the less likely it is the child will attend. Long distance to school causes irregular attendance and temporary withdrawals from schools which in the long run led to dropping out from school (Mwenje, 2008). Studies have shown that Children in urban areas have better chances for participating in ECDE programs than their rural counterparts because the pre-schools are near their homes and where schools are far, the children are transported by their economically able parents. Access according to geographical distance favors urban children (Nasibi, 2005)

#### **b) Parents' Level of Education and Access to ECDE**

Agembo and Cheptoo (2017) indicate that the fathers' education, occupation, and income level determines children's access to school. Children of educated parents are much more likely to go to school and the higher the educational level of the parents, the higher the chances their children will access from their education. Educated parents will be a role model to their children and will cultivate a positive attitude towards school in their children from an early age. They will encourage their children to develop inter-

est in schooling unlike uneducated parents who may have less influence on the education of their children. A research done by UNESCO in 2000 indicated that illiteracy level is very high in Kenya and Africa at large where 142 million adults are illiterate.

Parents with professional qualifications ensure that their children enroll and remain in school. Parents with low levels of education have negative attitude because they do not see immediate feedback (MOEST, 2012). They are also not able to help their children in areas of academic difficulties which discourage learners making them to dropout. Education of the mother is considered to one of the greatest determinants of enrollment in pre-schools. Mother's education leads to sustained increase in education attainment from one generation to the next. It's the education level of the parents that determines whether and for how long children access schooling. It is the education level of the parents that determines the child's employment decision (Ersado, 2005).

c) **Inadequate Teaching and Learning Resources.**

Many ECDE centers in Kenya lack adequate teaching and learning resource and facilities suitable for ECDE in their learning environment. These include lack of properly ventilated classrooms, furniture suitable for children, kitchen, safe clean water, playground, toilets and play material (Government of Kenya, 2006). This implies that teachers do not have adequate teaching and learning resources to enable them to implement ECDE Curriculum effectively. This affects implementation of ECDE Curriculum negatively as creation of a sustainable learning environment helps deprived children to improve their academic performance (MOEST, 2005)

d) **Socio-Economic Factors**

Malnutrition and ill-health are factors associated with the socio-economic factors. These factors can significantly damage the cognitive processing ability of children. The earlier conferences emphasized on the holistic development of children at this level, this included the right environment for children's growth, the right nutrition and the right education (Ministry of Education, 2012). According to a UNESCO (2005) report, Children whose processing capacity is impacted by ill-health and malnutrition may require more hours of instruction to learn various skills. As such, implementation of early childhood education may prove critical especially low income countries (Onsongo & Makinda, 2013)

Socio-economic differences affecting effective implementation of ECDE also cut across regions, with some being labeled 'marginalized' or Arid and Semiarid Lands (ASAL). Regional disparities have significant role in facilitating access to early childhood care and education, where enrollment levels in rural and marginalized areas are low in comparison to those in the urban areas. Children from the marginalized communities in rural ASAL suffer from lack of access to early childhood education. One typical example is nomadic Maasai community, which is one of the communities experiencing the least access to early childhood education and care because of way of life and regional disparities.

e) **Financial Constraint**

Financial constraints can lead to ineffective implementation of early childhood education. At macro level, Kenya has suffered from the heavy debt burden following its pursuit on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund fiscal policies such as the Structural Adjustment Programs. It is reported that these debt-servicing programs is partly responsible for significant reduction in government funding for subsidized education, health care and school related expenses. The result has been that families bear more responsibilities in implementation of early childhood education programmes (Ong'on'ga, 2009).

f) **High Teacher-Child Ratio with Poor Remunerations**

Teacher child ratio has been a subject of much attention among researchers in relation to the factors facing teaching and learning process. Early childhood development education has not been left out. Research shows that teacher child ratio has continued to grow. On average, teacher child ratio for both 3-5 years old children and 6-8 years olds still remains critical. Teachers are not comfortable with the increasing number of children in their classes they handle (Mwenje, 2008). Still with this high ratios, ECDE teachers are poorly remunerated and under the mercy of parents (most of whom have little or nothing to give).

Rising number of orphans: HIV/AIDS pandemic is one of the greatest challenges to mankind. Kenya has not been spared from the devastating effects, rising attrition rate for teachers and education officers 1.8% of the country's teachers are dying annually. Education sector is also experiencing lower productivity to absenteeism of ailing teachers and students, also number of orphans has been in the



increase resulting in low enrolment and increase in the dropout rates in ECDE centers (Government of Kenya, 2006).

**Free Primary Education:** One of the major goals of education in Kenya is to promote national development. It was with this in mind that the Kenya government introduced Universal Free Primary Education (FPE) in 2003 (Ministry of Education, 2012). This worthy gesture however did not include ECDE services. Early Childhood Development services continue to be provided on a partnership basis between the parents, the local communities and the government (Githinji & Kanga, 2011).

Despite the above challenges, there exist special opportunities that the county governments can capitalize on to spur the equity and access to ECDE in Kenya. The past decade has provided more evidence that good quality early childhood care and education, both in families and in more structured programmes, have a positive impact on the survival, growth, development and learning potential of children. Such programmes should be comprehensive, focusing on all of the child's needs and encompassing health, nutrition and hygiene as well as cognitive and psychosocial development (Ngome, cited in Ndani & Kimani, 2010).

At a broader perspective child academic success implies: relatively lower costs of education; increased projected earnings; increased parental earnings as a result of the freed time and increased parental satisfaction; aspirations and commitment to both child rearing and income in generating activities (UNESCO, 2005). Dropout, repetition, and failure rates in primary schooling will reduce and participation, completion and success rates improved. Children from low-income households who access ECDE services will be more likely to enroll in primary school at their peers who do not access the ECDE.

#### g) **Monitoring and Evaluation**

The government faces many challenges with regards monitoring and evaluation. Government ministries and districts have not fully embraced monitoring and evaluation, and there is a general lack of appreciation and a positive attitude towards monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring activities have not been harmonised resulting in duplication of effort, an inefficient use of resources, and an inadequate appreciation of monitoring and evaluation results. Funding for monitoring and evaluation is a major challenge within the government

## **Opportunities for Growth and Development**

Despite the many challenges addressed above, there exist several opportunities to spur access and equity of Early Childhood Education.

### a) **Preparation and Development of Enabling Policy Framework**

Since independence the government has over the years been involved in the development of ECDE. This has been through various ministries, projects, seminars, policy papers, Commissions as well as workshops that have shaped the ECDE programme to what it is today. Examples of these seminars and workshops include Malindi Seminar 1982 which was organized in Malindi sponsored and organized jointly by the Ministry of Education and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The major recommendations and achievements of the seminar included: Establishment of the National Centre for Early Childhood Education (NACECE) to advise the government on the modalities and logistics of disseminating the ECDE programme on a national scale and coordinate ECDE curriculum development. Consequently, NACECE was established in 1984 at the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE, 2006).

The other seminar was the Jadini Seminar 1987 which was organized by the Ministry of Education and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The major recommendations and Achievements of the seminar included: Need for ECDE partners and other agencies to focus their efforts on the empowerment and capacitating of parents and local communities for provision of holistic services for children. In 1997, the Kenya Government procured a credit from the World Bank to Support ECDE Programmes in the centres. The project was implemented between 1997 and 2002. Its main objectives were to: Increase access of ECDE services; improve child health and nutrition status; improve quality of personnel and reduce dropout and repetition rates at lower primary school (KIE, 2006).

### b) **Consolidating the gains of Free Primary Education**

The Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP) 2005-2010 in collaboration with development partners and other stakeholders prepared the KESSP investment with a view to consolidating the gains accruing from the implementation of FPE, address the main sector issues and to support the government in strengthening management and

delivery of educational services in order to improve access, quality, equity and relevance of education and training (Republic of Kenya, 2009). It is aimed at helping the government achieve and deliver policies set and outlined in the sessional paper No. 1 of 2005. In realization that an effective ECDE programme enhances a country's social economic growth and political stability, the government through the sessional paper No. 1 of 2005 recommended the development of comprehensive ECDE policy framework and service standard guideline. The policy and the service standard guidelines were launched in 2007.

#### c) **Enabling Legal Framework**

The new constitution of Kenya 2010 guarantees the Right to Education for everyone under Article 43, every child has a right to Free and Compulsory Basic Education Under Article 53 (b). Children are to be protected from abuse, inhumane treatment and violence under Article 53(1) (d). Youth are entitled to government measures which include affirmative action to ensure that they have access to relevant education and training, access to employ and protection from harmful cultural practices and exploitation under Article 55. The provisions given in these articles are strong enough to compel the government to provide this important public good.

#### d) **Devolving ECDE**

The Fourth Schedule (Parts 1 & 2) on the distribution of functions between the National and County governments gives the National Government the mandate over education policy, standards, curricula, examinations, university education and the granting of university charters, tertiary education and institutions and other institutions of research and higher learning. It also has the mandate for primary education, special education, secondary education and the promotion of sports and sports education. The County governments have mandate over pre-primary education, village polytechnics, home-craft centres and childcare facilities. According to the records retrieved from the Government of Kenya 2017 delivery portal, there has been an exponential growth in the numbers of ECDE centers across the counties constructed by the county government from the national government funding to adequately meet the needs of the 21st century child. The same portal also indicate that trained ECDE teachers have been employed by the counties to offer this very important service. This is a complete departure from the old tradition where anybody could be employed to offer this vital service.

#### e) **The National Development Blueprint, Kenya's Vision 2030**

The vision's main concern was the way in which education services are provided and to the structure of the education system. Kenya Vision 2030 recognizes that education and training of all Kenyans is fundamental to the success of the Vision. In order to realize the national development goals, relevant and quality education and training is required to meet the human development needs of a rapidly changing and a more diverse economy. A major challenge remains in ensuring and enhancing access, equity and education standards especially in marginalized regions and deprived urban areas.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper has highlighted the challenges and opportunities of access to and equity in the holistic early childhood education in Kenya. It identified at least issues that are pertinent to ECDE. These included geographic disparities in enrollment, policy and institutional challenges, poor curriculum implementation, gaps in teacher training, poor monitoring and evaluation and high teacher to child ration among many. To address these challenges, this study recommends the following policy and institutional changes:

- a) The government to implement free and compulsory ECDE for all children below five year olds in Kenya.
- b) The government to fully implement the ECDE policy, strategic development and implementation plan;
- c) The county governments under whose watch the ECDE is to develop a legislation that sets quality standards and develop an ECDE performance framework;
- d) Ensure that all primary schools have an ECDE unit;
- e) Create funding modalities for ECDE to include: start-up grant, capitation grant, school feeding, maintenance and development of infrastructure;
- f) Develop and implement appropriate ECDE programmes for all children with special needs, including the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups
- g) Develop and implement a score card system on key basic education indicators (on access,

participation, internal efficiency, and learning achievements, among others) for monitoring at various levels; institutional, county and national.

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