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Early childhood education programs in Kenya: challenges and solutions

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Early childhood education in Kenya serves the critical purpose of preparing young children for primary education. Notwithstanding the associated benefits for society as a whole, the government of Kenya is involved minimally. Indeed, parents are responsible for planning, developing and managing different early childhood programs. Consequently, problems such as funding and lack of program consistency are common. Because early childhood programs are essential, the government should be involved actively in the development and implementation process.

Keywords: early childhood in Kenya; preschools; transitioning into primary grades; school readiness

Kenya is an East African country that was formerly colonized by Great Britain. As a result, many institutions in Kenya are influenced heavily by the British culture. For example, although different indigenous communities in Kenya have always had early childhood education programs, the existing formal curricula are molded after various British school cultures (Lokshin et al. 2008). The first formal early childhood education program was started in 1940 to serve primarily European children. The colonial government formed, and mandated, the Early Childhood Development Centers (ECDCs) to manage the newly instituted programs, and restricted admission to children of European and Asian descent. Kenyan children of African origin were inadmissible. A decade later, Kenya was engulfed in a violent struggle for independence that displaced many Kenyan children from their homes. Consequently, the colonial government expanded the role of ECDCs to serve also the displaced children in Central Kenya. After gaining political independence from Britain in 1963, the new government of Kenya supported the development of Early Childhood programs throughout the country, preschools especially.

Since independence, Kenya has made tremendous gains in the development of Early Childhood education programs. With the help of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in 1971, the new government established the Preschool Education Project (PEP), and charged the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) with its administration (Adams and Swadener 2000). Although PEP had multiple responsibilities, its main goal was to improve the quality of preschool education through the development of viable training models for early childhood education personnel and curriculum (Swadener et al. 2000). The establishment of the National Center for Early Childhood Education (NACECE) in 1984, however, expanded PEP's responsibilities to include curriculum development

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and the training of trainers (Garcia et al. 2008). In 1985, PEP was reorganized through the formation of District Centers for Early Childhood Education (DICECE). The government then charged DICECE with the overall administrative duties of preschool education.

Prior to the establishment of preschool education, early care for children aged 3–6 years in Kenya was primarily the responsibility of local communities (Swadener et al. 2000, 2008). Nonetheless, ‘traditional care giving practices still persist in many areas, where mothers are the primary caregivers assisted by older children, grandparents, relatives, and neighbors’ (Marfo et al. 2008, 217) Where a traditional type of care still exists, research evidence has documented a decline in stimulation and type of care in the traditional societies (Koech and Njenga 2006). At the same time, there is a growing demand for alternative child care services for working mothers (Marfo et al. 2008). Recent changes in the social and economic landscapes motivated women to work outside their homes, thus increasing their migration from rural to urban areas. Although joining the workforce enabled Kenyan women to experience a degree of economic freedom, many families experienced a realignment of family support systems that had traditionally provided childcare services. For example, women who in the past had offered support in child-rearing and early care services were no longer available. Consequently the demand for formal childcare programs in Kenya increased, and led to the development of various preschool programs.

Preschool education

Preschool programs in Kenya serve children aged 3–5 years old. In addition to providing childcare services, preschools are intended mainly to prepare children for primary education. In recent years, for the reasons stated above, many parents have opted to enroll their children in various preschool programs, thus causing a tremendous increase in the preschool population. For example, a 2005 report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that enrolment in preschool programs in Kenya increased from 200,000 children in 1969 to 1,281,846 children in 2002. Despite the increase in enrolments, however, only a third of Kenya’s preschool aged children attend formal preschool programs (Adams and Swadener 2000). In terms of gender, boys are more likely than girls to be enrolled due to cultural, economic and environmental factors (Adams and Swadener 2000). Economically, parents who cannot afford to purchase school uniforms for both their sons and daughters tend to favor boys. A uniform is required for preschool participation, thus children without are not able to attend. Equally problematic is the issue of safety and the long distances some children have to walk from their respective homes to the nearest preschool. Parents are usually reluctant to enroll their daughters in preschool programs that are miles away from home. It is also common for parents to keep young girls at home to serve as childcare providers for the younger siblings in the family (Adams and Swadener 2000). The recent introduction of free primary education, however, has negatively affected preschool enrollment for both boys and girls.

In 2003, the government of Kenya introduced free primary education for all children. Under free education, the government agreed to fund all aspects of education except buying school uniforms for children in grades 1 to 12. Because preschool education is not free, many parents opt to enroll their children in primary schools

instead (Ngaruiya 2006). To accommodate the increasing population in primary schools, many preschool programs located previously in primary schools have been closed altogether. Meanwhile, the government's interest in preschool programs has dwindled due to its increasing focus on the success of free primary education. Instead, educational administrators are spending more time visiting primary schools to monitor the progress of free primary education (UNESCO 2006). In spite of the apparent problems plaguing preschool education, however, there is hope for a brighter future due to the critical role it can play in preparing children for primary education.

The future of preschool education

There is still a niche for preschool education in Kenya. In addition to preparing children for primary education, preschools provide childcare services for most families. To meet this need, preschool programs are mushrooming in different parts of the country at rates never seen before (Garcia et al. 2008). Indeed, a 2005 report by UNESCO estimated that Kenya had roughly 32,000 preschools due to the developing partnership between communities, the government and parents. In this partnership, the government does the coordination and parents and members of the community make decisions regarding the types of programs they would like to have (UNESCO 2005b). In spite of the proposed partnership, however, preschool education, early childhood care and nutrition programs especially are still funded primarily by parents and local communities.

Principles of early childhood education in Kenya

Formal early childhood education in Kenya is still in its infancy. For example, the government signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, essentially showing public support for programs that were already established. Nonetheless, it was not until 1990 that the government showed serious commitment by signing the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Since then Kenya has participated in several international endeavors related to early childhood education, thus demonstrating a desire to improve the well-being of young children. The 2001 Children's Act, for example, is of special interest because it amalgamated all laws pertaining to children's issues into one document. The act is now a legal framework that not only protects children's educational rights, but also advocates for them.

Under the 2001 Children's Act, the government established guiding policies for early childhood education in Kenya. These guidelines addressed the following areas: (1) meeting children's needs holistically to maximize the realization of their full potential; (2) safeguarding the rights of the child; (3) ensuring programs are child centered by recognizing that children are active participants and learners in shaping the events that influence their lives; (4) appreciating and recognizing parents and families as the primary caregivers and health providers of their children, and hence empowering and supporting them in their role; and (5) supporting and strengthening community-based management of early childhood services for sustainable development (Koech and Njenga 2006, 4). Additionally, the provisions of the 2001 Children's Act addressed issues that affected marginalized children and those with additional needs. Thus, the passing of the 2001 Children's Act allowed children from different backgrounds to access early childhood education.

Early childhood education in Kenya targets children 0–8 years old. According to the established guidelines, all children from before birth to eight years of age qualify for early childhood education. Although children in these age groups usually have similar needs such as ‘nutrition, health, nurturance, protection, stimulation and training’, children in different parts of Kenya have unique needs (Koech and Njenga 2006). For example, children from marginalized groups, usually in arid and semi-arid regions, need special attention due to the severe drought conditions that affect these regions from time to time, thus impacting negatively on the availability of nutritious diets. To meet such specific needs, the government and other non-governmental organizations usually provide additional help for these targeted groups.

The government and non-governmental organizations

Implementing early childhood education programs is a potentially daunting task. As a result, the government works in tandem with non-governmental agencies to facilitate the development and implementation of pertinent policies and programs (World Bank 2004; Koech and Njenga 2006). On the government side, the ministries spearheading various initiatives related to early childhood programs are: Education, Health, Home Affairs, Water, Planning and National Development, Finance, Gender, Culture, Sports and Social Services, Local Government, Agriculture, Roads, Housing, and Communications. Although the 14 ministries involved implement services related to their specific ministries, the Ministry of Education oversees the following critical portfolios: (1) policy guidelines on capacity-building of Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) personnel; (2) curriculum development and supervision; and (3) training and certification of ECDE teachers and trainers. Additionally, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the coordination of national early childhood education policies including advocacy and registration of preschool centers (Swadener et al. 2000). For efficiency, the National Center for Early Childhood Education (NACECE) has the mandate to supervise all early childhood education services. In addition to training all personnel, NACECE is responsible for the development and dissemination of curricula and research at the national level. At local levels, the District Centers for Early Childhood Education train preschool teachers. NACECE also supervises and inspects district programs. Other responsibilities for DCECE include the mobilization of communities in regard to health, nutrition and education for young children. DCECE is responsible also for curricula and research development at the district level (UNESCO 2005a).

School readiness

Preschool education prepares children for school – or does it? This question has been widely debated (Gay 1997; Kagan et al. 1995; Piotrkowski et al. 2000; Wesley and Buysee 2003; Snow 2006). In the USA, for example, school readiness refers to a maturation age, usually five years, when a child is ready for formal schooling (Snow 2006). Although age is possibly an important determinant of school readiness, other scholars have argued that the presence of ‘physical and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches towards learning, language, cognition, and general knowledge’ is what matters (Wesley and Buysee 2003, 352). As a result, children should not enter school until they have developed these critical skills (Datar 2006).

Most proponents of delayed school entry are informed by the notion that school readiness is multidimensional. For example, Snow (2006, 13) argued that school readiness is 'part of a larger picture involving at least the concept of ready schools'. Thus, in addition to considering whether or not a child is ready for school, school readiness requires a careful examination of schools. The concept of school readiness in the USA was raised first by the 1991 National Education Goal that required all children to start school ready to learn (Educate America Act, P.L. 103–277). Subsequently, the National Education Goal became the foundation for the school readiness movement now popularizing the following ideas: (1) readiness resides within the child and unfolds in stages until the child reaches maturation; (2) readiness can be supported or accomplished through environmental interventions; (3) readiness must take into account both child characteristics and experiences in the child's environment; and (4) readiness represents a set of ideas or meanings constructed by communities and schools (Wesley and Buysse 2003, 353). Due to the general lack of consensus about what school readiness really is, scholars view it in multiple ways.

Preschool education in Kenya

The aim of preschool education in Kenya is to prepare children for primary education, i.e. grades 1 to 12. However, the government does not require preschool attendance. On average, approximately 35% of Kenya's children have access to preschool education (UNESCO 2006). Currently, however, preschool curricula are academic in design and practice. Recent studies have argued that preschool and primary school curricula in Kenya fail to prepare children in all areas of their development (Kariuki et al. 2007), including personal, social and emotional development. Because school readiness involves the development of the whole child, it is important to revise the existing academic curricula. Meanwhile, due to the lack of focus on development in the preschool curricula, many families have assumed the important task of helping their children develop the necessary skills. The institution of family in Kenya is complex, due to inequalities in income and wealth distribution (UNESCO 2006). Indeed, because 58.6% of Kenya's population earn about one US dollar a day (where the agreed international poverty line is two dollars), issues of poverty tend to confound parental efforts to prepare children for school. According to Maggi et al. (2005, 10):

Families are the first environments with which children interact from birth. They are critically important in providing children with stimulation, support and nurturance. These qualities, in turn, are influenced by the resources that families have to devote to child-raising (social-economic status).

Families living in poverty lack the economic resources needed to support the development of skills associated with school readiness. Meanwhile, environmental issues, including differences in geographical location, exacerbate further the efforts of preparing children for school. For example, while poor children in Nairobi are likely to enroll in early childhood education programs, children of poverty in the Rift Valley province are not enrolled. Meanwhile North Eastern, the poorest province in Kenya, has virtually no early childhood program. Additionally, 'attendance rates for children from poor households fall below those for children from wealthy households' (UNESCO 2008, 51). To fill the void, local communities, with the help of the Aga Khan Foundation, have organized Madrasa programs that provide quality, affordable

and culturally appropriate preschool education for Muslim communities (Aga Khan Foundation 2007; Mwaura and Mohamed 2008). In all, however, funding is a critical issue for all early childhood programs in Kenya.

Funding

Government funding for early childhood education in Kenya is minimal. While the government provides support for the development of curriculum materials and remuneration for program coordinators at the National and District levels only, its funding for education per child per year is usually one US dollar (Pence 2004; Garcia, Pence and Evans, 2008). As a result, early childhood education is funded primarily through donations from local and international organizations, including the World Bank, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the Aga Khan Foundation. Notwithstanding the available financial support, however, there are funding discrepancies and, therefore, program inequalities.

Discrepancies between government policies and practices

The government of Kenya expects high-quality early childhood programs. Nonetheless, the administration and funding of the available programs is biased and haphazard. For example, although the government requires qualified educators in every program, it does not aid in teacher preparation (Government of Kenya 1988). Additionally, the government does not help in the construction of the needed learning facilities. Hence, 'a number of preschools do not have a permanent building. Teaching and learning is usually held outdoors under trees' (Adams and Swadener 2000, 394). Equally unequal are the availability of professional development opportunities and the implementation of curricula. The ratio of children to teachers is also an issue because some programs have a 1 to 100 ratio (Swadener et al. 2000). The following data from a preschool educator who taught in three different preschools, two located in high poverty areas and one supported by wealthy parents, illuminates various challenges related to funding discrepancies.

Lena's experience

I attended a two-year preschool teacher training college in Nairobi. The main focus of the training was to help teachers to understand how children grow and develop. We also learned about children with special needs and how to help them. I feel that this training provided me with the opportunity to learn how to provide care that helps children in their growth and development in different areas. During training, we used books and manuals provided by Kenya Institute of Education (KIE)

Regarding my work, I have worked in three different preschools. My first school was in Thika town where I taught in a poor preschool in Makongeni for 5 months. Most of the children came from Kiandutu slum. I had 35 children. I then taught in a rural community preschool in Mathioya District for one year teaching 25 children. Now, I am teaching in a private preschool in Kiriaini town. I have 10 children.

The preschool in Makongeni did not have enough teaching materials, and most of the time I had to improvise. Parents could not afford school uniforms, tuition and at the same time, extra money to purchase teaching and learning materials. The tuition they paid was

just enough to pay my salary. I had to be the teacher and the cleaner at the same time. I made my own toys, and used sisal bags for art work. I also made alphabets, numbers, and animal pictures on white nylon sacks.

The preschool in Mathioya was supported by the local community. In fact, parents helped to clean the building. However, the materials they bought were not enough and I still had to make my own teaching aids. Both Makongeni and rural Mathioya preschools did not have playground equipments. We made our own swings with sisal materials which I bought using my own money. I also helped the children make footballs and jump ropes using old fabric and plastic papers. These preschools lacked the resources necessary for early child development and growth. Meanwhile, parents determined my salary. They did not pay me well.

In my current preschool, a private academy in Kirianini town, I have a lot of teaching and learning resources. We have a fairly equipped playground including a sand box and a swing set. We also have nylon jump ropes, leather footballs and a lot of toys. The learning environment is a lot better compared to the other preschools that I have worked in. I teach fewer children (10) because we are two teachers. Also, we have scheduled nap times. This school is more demanding than the previous ones. Parents are involved fully and they always want to know what their children are learning. They are keen at having children learn reading and writing skills before they transfer to first grade.

None of the preschools have materials or equipments for special needs children. Another common thread in all three preschools is the availability of three activity books. Teachers use these books to plan teaching units and/or lesson plans. In addition, activity books have information on language, family, math, creative arts, music and human body movements. Similar also is teacher monthly salary of 2,500 shillings or 35 U.S. dollars. As for teacher qualifications, all three preschools followed the guidelines stipulated by KIE [high school certificate], but the academy preferred a teacher with a diploma [the equivalent of an associate degree]. Also, the academy requires teachers to always have written lesson plans and units. Teaching and learning materials are readily available in the academy only.

Lena's experience with preschool education in Kenya provides multiple lessons. The first lesson indicates that the planning, development and management of preschool education are primarily the responsibility of parents and local communities. Although the government provides policy guidelines through the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE), the nature of parental or community involvement shapes the identity of different preschools differently. The second shows the possible impact of the meager monthly salaries that preschool teachers are paid. Poor pay could be a hindrance to the implementation of quality early childhood programs. Meanwhile, the existing funding disparity between community and private preschools is a third lesson with deep ramifications.

School funding affects the process of teaching and learning in a variety of ways. For example, Ngaruiya (2006) noted that because private preschools in Kenya were funded adequately they were able to hire qualified teachers who in turn prepared children well for primary education. Parents in private preschools are usually wealthy and are able to provide teaching and learning resources. Also worth noting are the small class sizes that are common in private schools. The availability of funds in private preschools has made it possible to offer classes with low pupil-teacher ratios. Indeed, Lena's experience at Kiriani academy where she teaches 10 students is a vivid example of how funding affects class sizes. In all, however, a critical lesson from Lena's experience is that preschool education in Kenya is valued irrespective of parents' social and economic status. Adams and Swadener (2000, 399) offered similar

sentiments and added that ‘child care needs are universal in both rural and urban settings in Kenya. Thus, there is an extremely great need for accessible, affordable and safe child care.’

As Kenya grapples with the issue of making preschool education affordable and accessible, the government needs to explore the various ways in which wealth and poverty affects education for young children. Maggi et al. (2005, 20) argued that access to quality education is linked positively to socioeconomic status. Consequently, they cautioned that, ‘The most important influences on Early Child Development originate from within the family environment, the neighborhoods or village where those children live, and the type of Early Child Development programs that children are exposed to during their early years.’

Conclusions

Since the primary purpose of preschool education in Kenya is to prepare children for school, understanding the factors that influence enrollments is essential. Such understanding could help the government and all other interested parties to provide the needed resources. It is also clear that not all children in Kenya attend preschools due to existing cultural practices. In many communities, children under the age of five help parents by taking care of other children. Consequently, the government must develop a solution to the issue of children, particularly girls, providing childcare services. Unless there is a solution, disparities in school readiness will continue. Another important factor that hinders school readiness is the standard of living, since a majority of families in Kenya live in poverty, and are unable to enroll their children in early childhood programs. Meanwhile, the government should consider increasing its commitment to preschool education in the following ways: (1) educate parents in the use of culturally relevant skills; (2) encourage parental involvement in early childhood education through home visits or community-based training; (3) provide nutritional supplements for children in poverty stricken areas; and (4) organize community workshops that provide open discussions on the importance of early childhood education, thus promoting the active role of community members in the development of preschools in Kenya in marginalized areas. Other necessary measures may include providing free pre-primary education to all five-year-olds, providing government subsidies to Early Child Development Centers in poor communities and developing educational benchmarks for the education of younger children.

Finally, because there are not enough preschools in Kenya to meet the ever-growing demand for early childhood education, government support for the opening of new preschools and staff training is essential. In addition, the government should continue to monitor preschool education at the grassroots levels to ensure the planning, development and implementation of quality programs, and the inclusion of personal, social and emotional development in the preschool curriculum.

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