

Early Childhood Development: informing policy and making it a priority

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- Good quality early childhood development (ECD), including pre-school education is now widely recognised as a vital tool for transforming young lives.
- Despite differences in provision between countries, Young Lives research shows that attending pre-school has a significant and long-lasting positive effect on children's self-esteem, pride and educational aspirations. Children who attend pre-school education perform better in numeracy tests in all countries at all ages.
- In Ethiopia, Young Lives has informed and advised on the roll-out of O-Class (zero grade) before the start of primary school, providing evidence regarding both supply and demand side constraints on quality ECD.
- In Peru, Young Lives research helped to strengthen the focus on early learning in government programmes for pre-school children.
- Young Lives was commissioned by the World Bank to use data across all four countries to examine how pre-school experience affected children's later development. The World Bank commissioned Young Lives in part because it now provides a uniquely long time window to understand the later consequences of early circumstances. This analysis will be published in a forthcoming World Bank report.

Setting the scene

Exposure to good quality early childhood education programmes (not restricted to pre-schools) is one of the most effective ways of improving children's opportunities, both at school and in later life. Poorer children are particularly likely to benefit but also most likely to miss out. Most children in developing countries now have access to primary schooling, but the provision of pre-school education lags some way behind: worldwide, only half of all three to six-year-olds have access to pre-primary education. The Sustainable Development Goals have set an ambitious target: for every country in the world, by 2030, to ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood care and education.

What does Young Lives research show?

Young Lives research offers insights into the potential and the challenges of delivering on the SDG goal. In our four study countries, early education policies and services have been evolving over the past ten years. In 2006, all countries except Ethiopia had a well-established pre-school education system, although the quality was variable. In Vietnam the system was predominantly public; in Peru and India there was a significant private sector alongside the public provision; and in Ethiopia the emerging pre-school system was dominated by private kindergartens for wealthy families in urban areas. Pre-school attendance in our sample was high in Vietnam, Peru and India (87-91%) but very limited in Ethiopia (around 5%).

Our research has key messages which reinforce the benefits of pre-school education:

- Factors such as health and socio-economic background play a significant role in explaining later differences in test scores and pre-school attendance, particularly in Ethiopia where attendance is low and children who access pre-school are significantly more likely to come from better-off households and have parents with higher levels of education.
- Children who attend pre-school education perform better in numeracy tests in all countries at all ages, regardless of the type of pre-school attended (though quality pre-school is likely to be particularly beneficial).
- Attending pre-school has a significant and long-lasting positive effect on children's self-esteem, pride and educational aspirations. Gains are often sustained at age 12, seven years after attending pre-school. This suggests there may be enduring effects on other aspects of child development too.

The impact of Young Lives research

1. Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, the Young Lives team has been actively engaged for some years with the issue of how best to deliver the potential of early childhood education within the available national resources. Rates of access to pre-school programmes of any kind have historically been very low, and almost non-existent in rural areas. Since 2010 the government has started to consider the delivery of early learning, with all schools now being asked to add a zero grade (O-Class) before the start of primary school. Young Lives has been invited to inform and advise on the roll-out of O-Class, drawing on our expertise in early childhood to provide a strong comparative framework.

Previous analysis of Young Lives evidence in Ethiopia showed the potential that pre-school can have to support better learning, and so highlights this as a key strategy to help poor children. Recognising this policy gap in Ethiopia, in 2014 Young Lives sought additional funding from the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) to capitalise on existing data and established relationships to examine the case for pre-school Ethiopia.

Following initial consultations, the Young Lives team offered direct input into the draft section on early learning within the government's five year plan for education. We followed on with a series of small, highly-focussed, exploratory studies which draw attention to key challenges in delivering national plans for quality early learning to scale, and implementing them in the regions. To date, there has been very limited ECD research in Ethiopia so Young Lives' input in this area is critical. Research topics have been negotiated, to follow 'policy demand' with the focus on what will be of most practical use to the development of ECD in Ethiopia.

The focus on early childhood in Ethiopia has been given additional momentum from new initiatives, particularly the World Bank's Early Learning Partnership (ELP) programme which commenced in August 2016. Young Lives research has been used to help inform World Bank research priorities. Our research and engagement with government has helped to

identify and crystallise issues that might otherwise have been overlooked. Specific examples are:

- Young Lives' research found that the majority of children using the new O-Class provision, aimed at 6-year-olds, were in fact younger than the target age. This has identified the need for ELP and the early learning policy more generally to plan beyond O-Class and consider the needs of even younger children.
- Young Lives carried out research in teacher training colleges and identified that there was a limited understanding of the needs of O-Class teachers, often a lack of suitable training content or approaches, and lack of adaptation of the curriculum to the O-class model and context, and that the pace of the roll out of teachers training for diplomas and certificates was too slow to meet the rapidly growing need. As a result, in-service training for pre-school teachers will form a core part of ELP.

Young Lives' analysis of children's ages in O-class was also picked up by the World Bank and Ministry of Education, and influenced their decisions on how World Bank GEQIP grants should apply to O-class. Young Lives was also asked to provide evidence for the design of the current round of the GEQIP programme which includes grants to schools not just for primary school but also for O-class. This evidence was based on research into what community stakeholders want from O-class and how it fits with their expectations.

“Young Lives evidence that pre-school attendance has positive impacts on primary schooling attainment and achievement encourages the World Bank to explore the possibility to include interventions to support 0 classes in the General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP). The value added of Young Lives is in its evidence-based research focus which compliments the World Bank policy formulation and delivery/operationalization role.”

Thanh Thi Mai, Senior Education Specialist, World Bank Ethiopia

Young Lives' exploratory research studies have offered a further opportunity to build links with government. ECD experts from the government are involved in all research efforts, from study design through to fieldwork, providing an opportunity to see first-hand what is happening on the ground, and helping to build their knowledge and understanding of ECD, how it is being implemented in different regions and contexts, and the effectiveness of their role in delivering government plans, as well as exposure to qualitative research approaches to early learning used by Young Lives, and gaining a better understanding of priorities of parents and communities regarding ECD.

Young Lives made significant contributions to the Education World Forum (EWF) Event in 2016 and 2017. In January 2016 Young Lives was requested to brief the Ethiopian Minister of Education, as an input to the preparation of his presentation to the EWF. At DFID's request, key Young Lives staff, including the Country Directors for Ethiopia and India, gave an input into an ECD meeting at the same event. In 2017 the Ethiopian Minister of Education again used evidence from Young Lives in his speech at EWF.

Young Lives researchers in collaboration with experts from the Ministry of Education presented their findings on the

demand side for early learning at an international conference held in Addis Ababa in October 2017 on the theme *Putting Children First - Identifying solutions and taking action to tackle poverty and inequality in Africa*.

2. Peru

In 2009 Young Lives presented the results of research into the impact and perceptions of Peru's Programa Nacional Wawa Wasi, a government programme set up in 1993 to promote the optimal development of impoverished children aged six months to 4 years – the largest programme of its kind in Peru. Groups of up to eight children spent five days a week at a Wawa Wasi centre where they were assisted by a carer carefully selected from the local community, with a stated focus on safety, nutrition, health, parental practices and early childhood learning.

However, rather than being regarded as an institution that helped children to develop overall, the research revealed that centres were perceived by parents as day centres where children were safe and well-nourished, giving mothers the peace of mind to go to work or do chores at home. In addition, children who had spent at least six months at a centre showed little difference in motor and language development compared with children of similar socioeconomic characteristics who had stayed at home. This suggested that Wawa Wasi's goal of improving children's development was not sufficiently prioritised. The main recommendations arising from the research were to strengthen the early learning components of the programme and to enhance the skills of those who provided care.

In 2012 the Peruvian government turned the Wawa Wasi programme into Cuna Más, with a much-strengthened emphasis on early education. The Young Lives research had a direct impact on this change and its influence was acknowledged by the government.

““ The study results of Young Lives have been used, among other studies at the local and international level, in the elaboration of the childhood problematic diagnosis that is part of the design document of the Budget Program for Results (PPR) of the National Program “Cuna Más”. The Young Lives results have served as evidence to support the existence of gap problem in the levels of cognitive development and language between urban and rural areas, and regarding poverty quintiles, and justify the government intervention targeting to overcome this problematic. ””

Andrea Portugal, former Executive Director of Cuna Mas

Use of four-country data

In 2016 Young Lives was commissioned by the World Bank to revisit our core longitudinal data across all four countries, to examine how pre-school experience affected children's later development. This commission linked well with our ECD work in Ethiopia, and built on Young Lives' longitudinal research across all four study countries; it also demonstrates that the World Bank values the data and analysis. During Round 2 in 2006, Young Lives collected a large amount of data on attendance at pre-school for cohorts who are now aged 15. The continuous collection of data offers the opportunity to assess the impact of early education (or lack of it) on children as they grow up, in a way that is not possible with most other data sources. It also allows for examining differences between, for example, rural and urban children.

The report documents the relationship between pre-school attendance and numeracy skills development over time, as measured at the age of 5, 8 and 12, and provides suggestive evidence on the positive role of preschool for skills development, particularly in Vietnam and in Ethiopia (respectively the countries with the highest and the lowest pre-school enrolment). Young Lives data reveal that gaps in achievements already exist by the time children attend primary school and that those children lagging behind at an early age are more likely to be disadvantaged in the future. Good quality and free early education programmes targeting the most vulnerable might therefore compensate for initial inequalities, guarantee equal opportunities to every child, and go some way to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of primary education by improving school readiness. The report is due for publication within an upcoming World Bank volume and has already been cited in the [World Development Report 2018 on Education](#).

A further study on community perspectives was carried out to understand the demand side of ECD, revisiting sites for which the pre-school context was studied in 2008. This has provided important evidence of the evolution of the early learning environment in Ethiopia and how various stakeholders including local government, headmasters and schools, and parents and community leaders view the rapid expansion of services taking place. In February 2018 Young Lives researchers presented preliminary findings on the role of parents and communities in ECD at the 14th annual conference of the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers and Anthropologists with the theme *Child Agency and Parenting: Building the future Society*.