

Early Childhood Care and Education as a Strategy for Poverty Reduction: Evidence from Young Lives



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High-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) is now recognised as a core strategy for poverty reduction. There is evidence of high returns from ECCE investments, which can contribute to global policy priorities such as tackling child malnutrition, increasing children's successful participation in school, and strengthening economic development. In short, by supporting children and families early in life well-delivered ECCE can help to interrupt the cycle of poverty. But the reality is that this potential only becomes meaningful if ECCE programmes effectively reach the poorest and most marginalised children in the first place. Young Lives research finds significant inequalities in access to early education in Ethiopia, India and Peru, as well as clear discrepancies in the quality of services available. These findings underline the importance of ensuring that high-quality care and education in early childhood reach the poorest children if these policies are to fulfil their potential. This requires an increased focus on the most marginalised groups in society, targeted investments to improve the quality of services, and effective governance of both public and private sector provision, to support every child to have a good start in life.

Compelling research evidence now shows that early childhood is a critical phase for human development, and that access to high-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) can improve children's nutritional, health and education outcomes. Evidence of the long-term benefits from early intervention combines with estimates about the current loss in developmental potential, and data on the wider economic returns of early investment in children to build a persuasive case for targeted investment in quality programmes (for example see Heckman 2006; Engle et al. 2007).

Early childhood programmes are playing an increasing role in the lives of the world's children. Where previously ECCE tended to be limited to countries with a long history of universal primary education, over the last two decades it has become better established within the education systems of developing economies. This picture is mirrored in the Young Lives sample where between 80 and 95% of 6-year-old children in India, Peru and Vietnam had accessed pre-school at some point since their third birthday. While these figures do not account for the differences in the amount of time children spent in pre-school, or the content and quality of the services provided, access to some form of pre-school is clearly a growing experience. Out of the four study countries it is only in Ethiopia that pre-school remains a minority experience, attended by just one in four children in the sample.

While early childhood programmes are growing in number, ensuring quality of these services and equity of access to them is far less certain. Young Lives research

into pre-school services for children aged 4 to 5 highlights the importance of ensuring services reach the most disadvantaged children, as well as ensuring quality of services and adequate governance, if ECCE policies are to live up to their potential as a strategy for poverty reduction. In all four of the Young Lives study countries – Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam – the largest disparities relate to whether children live in urban or rural areas, household income levels, levels of maternal education, and differential access to public and private sector provision.

INCREASING COVERAGE OF ECCE WORLDWIDE BUT STARK INEQUALITIES

Between 80 and 95% of Young Lives sample children in Andhra Pradesh, Peru and Vietnam attended pre-school but:

- Pre-school in Ethiopia is almost entirely private, urban, and accessed by relatively advantaged families.
- Despite India's nationwide provision of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the majority of parents in urban areas of Andhra Pradesh are choosing private pre-schools, including 34% of the poorest households.
- Data from Peru shows that children from indigenous minorities are at a particular disadvantage due to intersecting inequalities of poverty, living in a rural area, and speaking an indigenous language.

Global commitments but services not reaching the poorest

As ECCE is increasingly regarded as integral to children’s development, it has also become reflected in global development and human rights agendas. Most notably, ECCE is prioritised as the first goal of the global Education For All (EFA) framework, which calls for expanding and improving ECCE with a focus on the most disadvantaged children. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has also asserted the importance of ECCE, interpreting every child’s right to education as beginning at birth and being tied closely to the right to development (UN Committee 2005, General Comment 7).

These international priorities are, to varying extents, being reflected in national government initiatives around the world. For example the Ethiopian government recently launched its first national policy and strategic framework on ECCE, while the Proyecto Educativo Nacional al 2021 in Peru makes ECCE a national priority. However, major challenges still exist, including the need for better coordination and a stronger multi-sectoral approach. India, for example, has the world’s largest publicly funded early childhood system in the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), yet its focus on nutrition means that the educational component is considered to be weak, while India’s new Right to Education Act does not include education for children under the age of 6 years old.

In line with global trends, 94% of children in the Young Lives sample in Vietnam have attended pre-school at some point since their third birthday, 87% in Andhra Pradesh, and 84% in Peru. But these overall statistics are deceptive. They take no account of the variable quality of services and disguise important differences in opportunity, linked especially to children’s location (urban or rural), the type of pre-school they attended (public or private), the age at which they started pre-school, and levels of maternal education. Taking all types of provision together, children from the poorest families are clearly under-represented, while the more advantaged are over-represented, posing the question of whether early childhood services are currently benefiting better-off children more than the poorest.

Poverty and ethnicity

In Peru 96% of children in the wealthiest households had some experience of pre-school, but that figure fell to 71% for the poorest. Coverage may also vary by ethnicity, for example in Vietnam 91% of Kinh children (the ethnic majority) in our sample had experienced some form of pre-school in 2006, but this fell to 77% among minority ethnic children (Truong 2009). The benefits of pre-school intervention should be greatest for the most disadvantaged children, yet these groups of children are the least likely to receive it.

Significance of maternal education

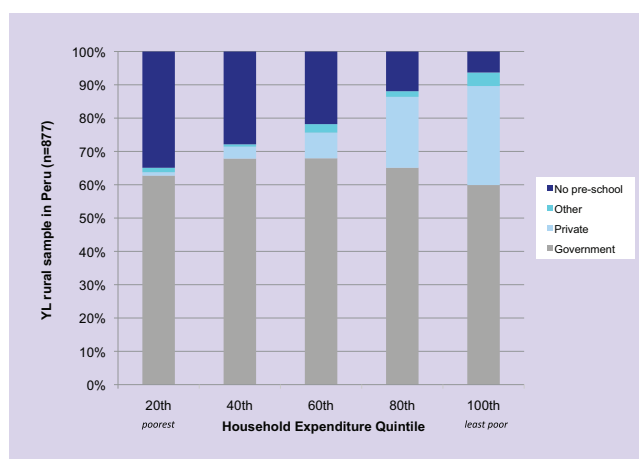
In Peru, virtually all of the children with mothers who have more than 10 years of education attended pre-school. Meanwhile over 30% of children whose mothers have less education (0 to 4 years) started school without any experience of a pre-school programme, setting them at an early disadvantage at school and perpetuating wider intergenerational poverty and inequality. In Andhra Pradesh higher levels of education among mothers was also linked with children’s attendance at private pre-school, and higher expectations for their education, irrespective of household poverty level.

Urban-rural differences

Ethiopia has made rapid progress towards universal primary education, despite being among the poorest countries in the world. But access to pre-school remains very limited, particularly in rural areas. Only 25% of caregivers reported their child had attended pre-school, and this figure dropped to just 4% among rural children. Meanwhile attendance levels in urban areas are strongly linked to income levels, with only around 20% of the poorest households accessing pre-school, compared to around 70% of better-off families.

In Peru, as Figure 1 shows, access for rural children to government pre-schools is relatively high and evenly distributed with broadly similar proportions of children accessing public pre-school (between 60 and 70% of children). It is mainly the private sector that accounts for the disparities. In urban settings, participation in government pre-schools is higher for the poorest groups (80 to 90%) than for better-off families who are much more likely to opt for private pre-schools.

Figure 1. Attendance by pre-school type and poverty levels for Young Lives rural sample in Peru by the age of 6



Public-private differences

Inequalities relating to wealth, background and location are often compounded by differences in school resources in both the public and private sectors, but especially in the private sector. For example, our evidence shows that while private pre-schools in Ethiopia fill a vacuum, they are only really benefiting better-off urban children. Both Peru and Andhra

Pradesh have well-established government systems, but there is also significant private sector provision in urban areas.

Figure 2 highlights that government *anganwadis* in India are widely used by children in rural communities, particularly the poorest households. It is only for some better-off groups that private pre-schools are an option, attended by 31% of the children in the 'least poor' group. But the picture in urban Andhra Pradesh is strikingly different, with private pre-schools chosen by parents across different wealth groups (Figure 3). Poverty levels are strongly predictive of whether children attend private pre-school, but a surprising 34% of the poorest households are opting for private pre-school, compared with 46% attending public pre-schools (and the remaining 20% not yet in school).

Figure 2. Attendance by pre-school type and poverty levels (rural sample, Andhra Pradesh) by the age of 6

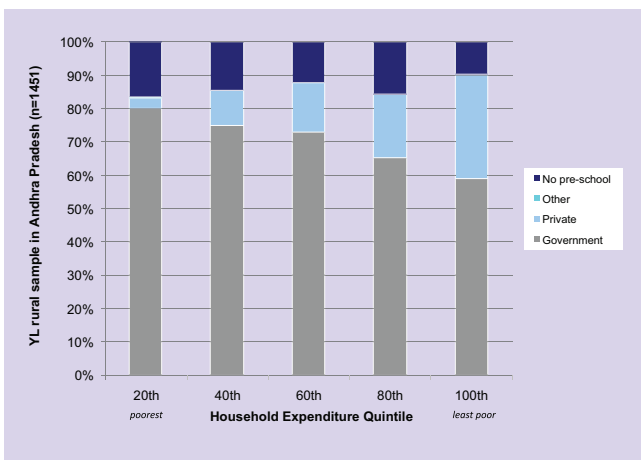
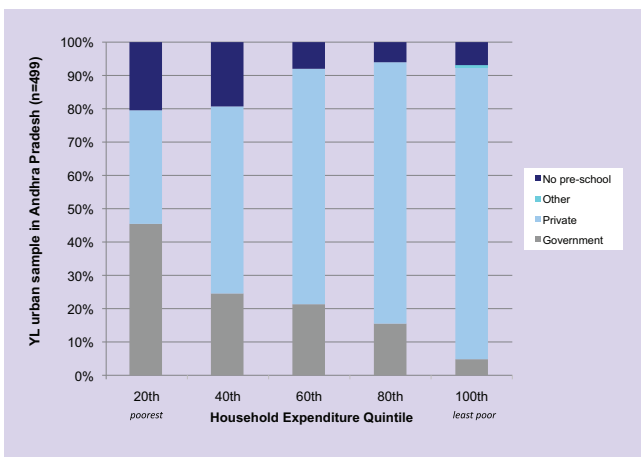


Figure 3. Attendance by pre-school type and poverty levels (urban sample, Andhra Pradesh)



Disparities in the quality of services

Disparities in the quality of ECCE services reinforce these inequalities in access, and further perpetuate poverty. Young Lives research indicates the huge variation in buildings, resources, care and teaching at pre-school, with the worst services being very poor quality indeed. Furthermore, while children's 'school readiness' through early learning is widely

considered a foundation for success in subsequent school years, our research shows that there is often very limited focus on supporting children's transition from pre-school into primary, with the burden of adaptation falling on children themselves.

For example, our research in Peru highlights several challenges faced by children as they start primary school. Teachers reported a lack of coordination and communication, which were experienced by parents and children as discontinuities and contrasts between pre-school and first grade. Moreover, young children often encountered physical punishment as part of their first contact with school - which impacted negatively on their adaptation (Ames et al 2010). Young Lives has also studied the Wawa Wasi programme in Peru, which seeks to widen ECCE access to disadvantaged children. While the scheme is popular, there is no demonstrable cognitive effect, suggesting that improved investment and training of those running the Wawa Wasi centres are needed to increase its impact (Cueto et al. 2009).

In India, the ICDS programme aims to ensure that even households in remote areas can access local ECCE services, including immunisation, growth-monitoring, health and referral services, as well as pre-school education. However, numerous assessments have pointed to the weak educational component of the *anganwadis* and the need for increased staff training and resources in order to better combine their health and nutrition functions with early learning. There is an important parallel here between the low pay and training of staff in the *anganwadis* in India and the Wawa Wasi centres in Peru, which are both often run by women from poor rural communities working with minimal resources.

The perspectives of Young Lives parents, children and teachers highlight some of these challenges.

“In my daughter’s kindergarten, the quality of education was good but ...other kindergartens have a large number of children in a single class (40 to 50 per teacher)... and there is a shortage of toys and other play materials”
(Young Lives parent, Ethiopia)

“I did not like it [the anganwadi]. Nobody is there. There is only one old lady [the anganwadi helper]. She serves food, and sends us off.”
(Young Lives child, Andhra Pradesh, India)

“I heard they [the Ministry of Education] provide some learning materials for primary schools but for pre-school they don’t. I see private [pre-schools] with books, children paint, it eases the job [to have materials] and the child is more into it, right? But we have to make do with what we have.”
(Rural pre-school teacher, Peru)

Conclusions and policy implications

The lack of early childhood services or the problems associated with low-quality education may not be perceived as a policy issue until they become evident in the form of low achievement, grade repetition, drop-out rates, or disaffection and anti-social behaviour at later ages. But our data confirms that inequalities are established in the very early years, reflected in the availability and quality of ECCE services as well as primary education, in the choices that families make, and in children's overall socio-economic environment.

The challenges for ECCE include ensuring equitable access, targeting the poorest, most marginalised communities, raising quality standards, and recognising where equality goals may be incompatible with a market-led private system. There is a huge global gulf between the proven potential of ECCE as pro-poor strategy and the current realities faced by children and families.

Young Lives evidence suggests that to maximise the impact of ECCE services on poverty, national governments and donors need to develop clearer policy objectives around:

- Expanding ECCE services to reach the poorest, most marginalised children
- Improving quality in early education, especially for disadvantaged children
- Improved coordination between pre-school and school systems.

Expanding ECCE services to reach the poorest and most marginalised children: While many government early

childhood services build on pro-poor policies, they often do not function effectively to achieve that goal in practice. Early education opportunities combine with parental choices to reinforce rural-urban, ethnic, caste or class, and gender divisions. Inequalities within households have also been identified, where families make choices about which child to educate privately, which to send to a government school, which to withdraw early, and so on. To reverse these trends, governments along with donors and other agencies have a central role to play to boost the quality and strengthen the governance of services in ways that reach the poorest children.

Improving quality in early education: Early childhood programmes play a major and increasing role in children's lives, even in countries where primary education systems are still being consolidated. If the poorest children have access to good services, this has real potential to prepare them for school, as well to combat malnutrition and disease through nutrition and immunisation programmes. But early education services are often of variable quality, as are the schools to which children progress. Identifying cost-effective and sustainable ways to improve early childhood services, including building the skills and motivation of teachers, is a high priority.

Improved coordination between pre-school and school: Even in countries with well-developed early education services, starting school is frequently stressful for children and parents because of a lack of communication and coordination between two sectors that are governed by different management structures, organisation and financing, professional training, curricula and pedagogy. Ensuring effective transitions between pre-school and primary has been a major ECCE theme among the world's richest countries over many decades. Addressing these issues is now a global challenge.

RELATED RESOURCES

P. Ames, V. Rojas and T. Portugal (2010) *Continuity and Respect for Diversity: Strengthening Early Transitions in Peru*, Working Paper 56, The Hague, Bernard van Leer Foundation

C.H. Truong (2009) 'Schooling as Lived and Told: Contrasting Impacts of Education Policies for Ethnic Minority Children in Vietnam seen from Young Lives Surveys', background paper prepared for *Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2010*, Paris: UNESCO

S. Cueto et al. (2009) *Promoting Early Childhood Development through a Public Programme: Wawa Wasi in Peru*, Young Lives Working Paper 51

P. Engle et al. (2007) 'Strategies to Avoid the Loss of Developmental Potential in More than 200 Million Children in the Developing World', *The Lancet* 369 (9557): 229-42

J.J. Heckman (2006) 'Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children', *Science* 312: 1900-02

UNESCO (2006) *Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2007: Strong Foundations Early Childhood Care and Education*, Paris: UNESCO

UNESCO (2009) *Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2010: Reaching the Marginalized*, Paris: UNESCO

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