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Towards Gendered Enhanced Access to Early Childhood Care and Education for Rural and Marginalized Children in Kenya

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Abstract:

Early childhood is the fastest period of development in a human life. The definitive aim of Early Child Development Education (ECDE) programs is to prepare young children's capacity to develop and learn. These programs enable children who are ready for school to gain a combination of life-long values socially, physically and emotionally healthy. The child becomes confident and approachable; has admirable peer relationships; solves challenging tasks and is resilient in his undertakings; has good language skills and communicates well; is perceptive to instructions and is attentive. A child who is properly grounded in ECDE programs has minimal chances of repeating a grade, being referred for special education, or dropping out of school. Despite Kenya's progress in the provision of ECDE, many still lack access to this education. As a result, many children from vulnerable backgrounds do not access this critical education.

Gendered inequality and women's low status have especially limited women's autonomy and denied them rights to health, nutrition, education, ownership of property and bodily integrity. The corona pandemic virus compounded with disparities posed by different implementation approaches used devolved governments complicates quality access to ECDE in Kenya. Drawing on knowledge mobilization model utilizes strategy, innovative ideas, approaches, practices, resources, tools and activities that integrate knowledge into actions and solutions to the problems of the targeted population, this paper discusses possibilities of increasing gendered access to early childhood education by considering improvement in maternal health, nutrition, and social protection as well as a recommendation for model early childhood centres in Kenya.

Keywords: ECDE, Gendered inequality, devolved governments, knowledge model

1. Introduction

Early childhood is the fastest period of development in a human life. The definitive aim of Early Child Development Education (ECDE) programs is to prepare young children's capacity to develop and learn. These programs enable children who are ready for school to gain a combination of positive attributes socially, physically and emotionally healthy (Werker & Hensch, 2015). The child becomes confident and approachable; has admirable peer relationships; solves challenging tasks and is resilient in his or her undertakings; has good language skills and communicates well; is perceptive to instructions and is attentive. A child who is properly grounded in ECDE programs has minimal chances of repeating a grade, being referred for special education, or dropping out of school.

In many communities in sub-Saharan Africa, gender inequality is one important loose point that leads to children's poor development in the early years. Gendered inequality and women's low status have limited women's autonomy and denied them rights to health, education, ownership of property and bodily integrity. Yet, women are deprived of their mental, nutritional and physical health it negatively affects their children's survival and development. This paper discusses possibilities of increasing gendered access to early childhood education by considering improvement in maternal health, nutrition, and social protection as well as a recommendation for model early childhood centres in Kenya.

2. Sealing the Loopholes

ECDE interventions include providing education and support to parents, providing services to children, developing capacities of caregivers and teachers, and using public media to increase parents and caregivers' knowledge and practices. ECDE has the capacity to fast-track Education for All (EFA) and achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 1-5) for reduction of poverty and hunger, good health, quality education, and gender equality. Successful ECDE programs guarantee primary school completion in subsequent years. Learning develops in relation to broad environmental variables such as the child's family, home and community who influence the content and learning behaviours of the child (Takesian & Hensch, 2013). An enriched environment enhances the child's social, mental and physical growth and is essential for the best returns in a child's education.

Nelson and Gabard-Durnam (2020), argue that early childhood is sensitive period of child development and that early stimulation and preparation for education enhances a child's language and retention of learned experiences up to the summative levels of learning. These scholars argue that childhood is characterized by rapid changes in the individual at the neural and behavioral levels which ultimately impacts on the child's later life.

Zhanong (2015) posit that a child's brain is ninety percent developed by age five and that good nutrition, healthcare, social security, play and early learning at this sensitive stage are all the children require to support their physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional. developmental domains.

Despite Kenya's progress in the provision of ECDE, 28 percent of the children are not accessing pre-school education even when the constitution has abolished payment of school fees for basic education by the parents. Yet, parents who are economically endowed pay school fees to ECDE private providers to access this education. There is, clearly, a gap between theory of the law and the practical implementation. As a result, many children from vulnerable backgrounds do not access this critical education. The corona pandemic virus complicates the situation as vulnerable children will remain at home for lack of resources to buy facemasks and other Covid 19 containment requirements. The rich will take their children to private ECDE centres where social distancing is guaranteed.

There is need to establish regional and even county model ECDE centres to provide pre-school level education to poor children in Kenya. UNICEF (2017) reports that there are 1.6 million children of ages 4-6 years who are malnourished and do not access pre-school education in Kenya. These children wait up to age 6 to enrol in grade one in government schools where education is a national government function as opposed to ECDE which is devolved. This project targets to establish ECDE model centres to increase poor and marginalized children's capacity, especially the girl child, to enrol in school. The children will be selected from poor and marginalized families. This program is set to inspire, nurture and develop their interest in education and school by providing a conducive environment.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Dakar Framework for Action on EFA (2000) and the Moscow Framework for Action and Cooperation (2010) and Africa Union Agenda 2063 commit the global world to ensure that all young children benefit from early childhood education and care as a human right with particular sensitivities in promoting gender equality, quality, inclusion and social protection at all levels. Increasing access to quality early childhood development and education (ECDE) is critical in achieving greater goals for education and development. In Kenya, the country's Constitution (2010), Basic Education Act (2013) and the National Pre-Primary Education Policy (2018) declared free and compulsory pre-school, primary, and secondary education. Basic education is therefore a constitutional right in Kenya. The constitution also devolves ECDE as a function of the county governments. This means each county government develops its own curriculum and designs learning and teaching materials. The county governments will also choose who and what to teach under what terms. A substantial number of Kenya's 47 counties have ambitious plans to up-scale access to ECDE. These plans will, however, need cooperation and support from stakeholders in terms of developing a harmonized curriculum that is responsive to diversity as well as provision of sufficient resources and improved capacity at the county level for successful devolution of this function. Kenya has achieved comparatively high ECDE enrolment in the past two decades albeit with wavering government financial support. UNICEF (2017) reports that the net enrolment in pre-school education increased from 33 percent in 2005 to 72 percent in 2014. This gain, however, faces the challenge of Covid 19 pandemic which threatens to lock out many pupils from school. Although the Constitution defines pre-school education as free, individual parents have borne the biggest share of financing ECDE services in the form of fees payment in private ECDE centres which are mostly found in urban centres. The rural poor, marginalized and the culturally disadvantaged girl-child have not benefited from this arrangement. This project targets curriculum formulation, funding as well as policy gaps as some of the viable issues to be addressed towards achieving ECDE optimal access in Kenya's devolved governments.

UNICEF (2017) estimates that 45 per cent of children under age 18 which translates to 9.5 million children, live in poverty. The report reveals geographic inequity: for instance, 85 per cent of children in the far north Turkana county live in abject poverty, compared to 7 per cent in Nairobi, the capital. The report shows that many Kenyan children are malnourished, lacked access to safe drinking water, and lacked basic education and lived-in poor health. Many girls experienced harmful and negative practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage and, as a result, lacked the same education and development opportunities as boys.

A preschool agenda with an inclusive and appropriate curriculum, nurturing pupil-teacher interactions as well as parental support will be beneficial in preparing disadvantaged and vulnerable children for early childhood education. Three project pilot components are to develop cost-effective, sustainable models for increasing access to ECDE services in terms of gender inclusivity, access by poor and marginalized children through provision of community support and grants, improvement of nutrition and health standards of preschool pupils aged 0-6 years. The project should also support a smooth transition from preschool to primary school. At the regional level, the project is implemented with support of the county governments.

This ECDE project should improve access to and enhance the quality of services that help young children's care, health, nutrition, social security, as well as their psychosocial and cognitive developmental needs. The key project components should aim to improve child's cognitive and psycho-social development; mitigate child's health and nutrition from conception; strengthen early childhood care and access to ECCE by poor and marginalized children; mitigate gender inequality in ECCE; support of children in need of special care and protection; establish regional model ECCE centres, and; consolidate project management, supervision, monitoring and provision of strategic feedback. The program will reach out to 3200 children, rural and urban children under age 6. Parents, education officers, political leadership, the private sector, health caretakers, and community leaders will be involved. The national as well as county governments in strategic

ministries and departments of health, education, labour, culture and gender, agriculture, finance, and information will be incorporated.

The project Technical Assistance Team (TAT) should be guided by four considerations: targeting the poor and marginalized groups; inclusive project development; the integrated life-cycle model, which emphasizes holistic development of children of the targeted ages; and sustainability. The TAT should build on previous experiences by the national government in implementation of successive national policies on preschool education. Intervention activities under the project should be expected to target selected participants from the sampled counties of Kenya while policy and capacity-building activities should be organized with nationwide representation.

3. Needs Assessment Knowledge Mobilization Model for Inclusive Education

A needs assessment that should map out the problems of preschool children, their families, the community, caretakers and stakeholders with regard to strengthening ECDE program. The TAT should also assess the health and nutrition constraints that mothers, health care providers, preschool caretakers, and social workers face in providing ECDE services. TAT should be consulted to help the PI in analysing secondary data, surveys, and systematic qualitative research to evaluate: the ECDE status and its challenges experienced by the target populations in the selected counties; ECDE childcare practices at home; ECDE health-care, preschool education programs, gender parity, and social protection access by children, and: ECDE constraints faced by the families and stakeholders.

Policy and sub-Sector Analysis and training should document technical measures and policy approaches needed to improve ECDE and to mitigate challenges identified by the needs assessment. The TAT should analyse early child education and care at home and in the community. This analysis will focus on identification of challenges and issues required for quality improvement, ECDE effectiveness and efficiency in services delivery, budgetary allocations, human resources issues, and critical policies; and cost-effective and practical solutions. The activities initiated by the county governments and other development partners should be systematically reviewed. The special technical team shall conduct short training and workshops for parents, stakeholders and ECDE county governments staff on conventional best practices in critical aspects of ECDE.

The knowledge mobilization model utilizes strategy, innovative ideas, approaches, practices, resources, tools and activities that integrate knowledge into actions and solutions to the problems of the targeted population. The project should provide pre-school education to the children aged 0-6 years using an innovative approach. These children shall be selected from economically poor and disadvantaged backgrounds where the children hardly get the chance to access education. The project should motivate and inspire them to learn and remain in school full cycle by selecting stimulating education materials and learning experiences. The materials selected such as playing instruments, ropes and thread, modelling kits, toys, colours, word and game puzzles, pocket boards and cards, and whiteboards shall be familiar to the selected children. There shall be classrooms with a small capacity of children in each classroom considering social distancing rules to contain Covid 19 pandemic as well as to provide personalized attention by the teacher. The teachers will be selected from local community for sustainability and for cost effective measures.

Teachers will teach the children contextualized poems with rhyme, storytelling, dance, counting and naming through song to stimulate their mental and cultural faculties. The children will learn the virtues of sensation, resilience and honesty through games and sports. The project shall aim to provide an eventful and memorable childhood to the rural and urban poor and marginalized groups especially the girl-child. In the second year, the children shall be introduced to basic reading and writing. Rhyming poetry, song and oral narratives will continue to inform the learning experiences since they guarantee memory retention.

The teachers should be trained on Covid 19 containment measures to enable them protect themselves, the stakeholders and the children they will be taking care of. Several workshops should be held with the participation of parents, education officers, stakeholders such as local political leadership, county and national government officials, school teachers and, women and youth groups. This approach will ensure sustainability. A consideration to train and follow up on expectant mothers at an early stage of their pregnancy from marginalized groups in each region will be done with a view to follow up and mitigate health and nutrition challenges during pregnancy and during lactation. These mothers will learn how to take care of their unborn babies. The lessons learned and findings will be up-scaled in other county governments.

4. Gender Equality, Equity and Inclusion Considerations

As Kenya makes progress towards the Education for All (EFA) goals and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Vision 2030, including universal basic education and gender equality policies and legislations targeting at all levels of education, increasing attention should focus on the 1.6 million children who are still out of school due to poverty and neglect. The numbers are likely to sharply rise in the next one year due to the effects of Covid 19 on families, especially the economically vulnerable ones. In particular, there is a need to focus on children who are at risk of being excluded, the marginalized and those disadvantaged in their pursuit of accessing educational opportunity. Sustainable efforts need to be put in place so that when such children attend school, they do not drop out until they complete the full cycle of their primary education. Indeed, the human right to education as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 declares the need for inclusive education. Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) pronounces the right for all children to access education without discrimination of any kind. Some children are specifically under threat of not accessing ECDE. These children include: those from poor family backgrounds; those living in remote rural areas; girls; children ravaged by Covid 19 and/or HIV/AIDS; those with disabilities; children from minority groups

and those in border and arid counties staring at cross-border invasions by militant groups. Gender inequality is a cross-cutting issue in every aspect of educational arrangement.

In spite of efforts to increase and improve the quality of early childhood education and care for girls and boys globally, integrating a gender perspective particularly in accessing as well as teacher training policies remain gaps in sub-Saharan Africa including Kenya. This threat to early childhood poses the risk of undermining the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (1-5) and an array of other national legislations and policies. Gender-based inequalities in education processes and outcomes persist due to deep-seated gender stereotypes that are formed early in life. Strengthening gender equality in Kenya and in the East African region calls for provision of a quality, gender-sensitive ECDE for a harmonious and sustainable society. Fortunately, Kenya is promoting gender equality in schools through awareness campaigns and is set to develop more policies to mitigate the problem of parity. However, there is a gap when we consider that early childhood education begins with conception and not necessarily from age at 3 where parents, stakeholders and government normally pick up the children for preschool. This project undertakes to outline sustainable aspects at the education system and pedagogical levels that will ensure gender-responsive accessibility to ECDE.

5. Research Ethical Considerations in Early Childhood Education

Codes of ethics provide the project researcher with a set of general ethical principles and practical rules to guide them in undertaking the project. The purpose of the code is to ensure that the project team is committed to the professional research ethics guidelines considering that the research participants include minors in the project.

Research ethics emphasize the responsibility of the researcher in decision-making, accountability, reputation, cultural sensitivity, apportioning credit as well as informed consent when undertaking research among under age children. Consequently, the researcher should conduct the research with utmost respect, confidentiality, reciprocity and responsiveness as context may allow. The researcher shall work with informed consent, given the age of the children involved to minimise harm and allow voluntary participation and guarantee privacy as need may arise. Informed consent in this context refers to consent gained at the level of comprehension of the participant. This means that consent is given by participants who have sufficient knowledge of the research project and know their specific roles including taking responsibility in case of omission or commission. In the case of under age children, the capacity to give consent is problematic; but it can be realized. Consent can be given on behalf of children by agreement with parents or their guardians with an assumption that parents act in the best interests of their children. Despite the justification, this delegation of consent does not effectively meet the threshold for requirements of informed consent on the part of actual participants. However, to counterblast this shortcoming, the researcher should respectfully explain the project appropriately to parents and their children before consent is requested. Hughes and Helling (1991) posit that this should not be misconstrued to imply that researchers should make an effort to acquire consent from children by making them informed research participants.

Instead, the purposes and procedures of a project can be explained in clear terms subject to the child's developmental level as well as in consideration of their immediate environment and personal experiences. Requesting children to accept taking photographs together with their friends and their parents as well as seeking their permission to write their stories in a notebook can be quite respectable to them. Obtaining their permission to tape-record the discussions they are involved in can be quite exciting when they listen to themselves through the earphones prior to familiarization and during the interviews.

The beneficiary county governments will be mobilized and sensitized to consider more budgetary allocations for preschool education. The beneficiary communities will be sensitized to contribute positively towards the education of the rural and urban poor and the marginalized girl child. Community management committees in each county will be tasked to mobilize non-governmental organizations and private wealth individuals to set up an ECDE grant for poor and marginalized children, especially the girl child.

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