

# **ECE in Kenya: Opportunities for enhancement in the different environments**

**Dr Michael Karanja**

## **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the situation of Early Childhood Education and Development in Kenya, analyzing the newly introduced competency based curriculum (CBC) and its likely benefits history of ECE provision. The challenges facing provision of ECD services in different contexts including informal urban settlements and pastoral areas, as well as the emerging practices such as testing and examinations, child nutrition, teacher remuneration and high cost of ECE to families. It ends by providing local empirical evidence on benefits of ECE on school readiness.*

**Key Words:** Early Childhood Development, competency based curriculum, pastoralist, informal urban settlement, readiness

## **Contexts**

### **Kenya:**

Kenya is located in the East African sub-region of Africa with a coverage of 582,646 Square Kilometers, 97.8% comprising of land and 2.2% water surfaces. It neighbours Tanzania to the south and southwest, Uganda to the west, South Sudan to the north-west, Ethiopia to the north and Somalia to the north and North-Eastern part. The country's long-term development goals are set out in Vision 2030, which aims to transform Kenya into a newly industrializing, middle-income country providing a high quality of life to all its citizens by 2030 in a clean and secure environment. According to the 2019 national census, there were 47.6 million Kenyans. 51.34% of the population is below 18 years with those aged 5 years and below being 20.45% of the population.

This East African country has rapid and increasing economic transformation enabled by the emergent digital ecosystem, in effect becoming a modern economy faster than its East African peers. The significant automation and productivity gains has resulted to development of technological applications innovations to improve health care, education, and e-government. However, social inequality and bridging values remains a challenge in improving lives and support national development with employment and income enhancement opportunities.

### **ECD in Kenya**

Kenya attained independence from Britain in 1963. Pre-independence early childhood services were provided to African mothers working as British farm labourers. After independence in 1963, an important factor of local preschool provision was the spirit of “Harambee” meaning self-help as a means to bottom-up nation building. Up to the 1970s, during its first decade, this provision enabled local communities to determine and define their own needs and to create programmes to address their needs. This resulted to poor establishment of preschool services and structures based on parents’ economic abilities.

## **Global trends**

Kenya abides by international conventions related to education. To illustrate, the country was one of the few that were close to meeting the Universal Primary Education under the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All targets. To achieve the targets, Kenya adopted the Free Primary Education Policy (2003) and Free Day Secondary Education Policy (2008).

In the current global orientation, Kenya has ratified Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and inherently showed its commitment to SDG-4, which calls for an inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. The SDG-4 is domesticated in the 2018-2022 National Education Sector Strategic Plan (NESSP).

## **Curriculum**

The country is transiting to a competency-based education aimed at replacing the 8-4-4 system by 2028. The Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) seeks to nurture every learners potential by ensuring all learners acquire the seven core competencies<sup>1</sup> i.e Communication and collaboration

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Imagination and creativity
- Citizenship
- Learning to learn
- Self-efficacy
- Digital literacy

They also earn the values of

- Love
- Responsibility
- Respect
- Unity
- Peace
- Patriotism
- Integrity

The development of the competencies requires a shift towards more emphasis on formative evaluation. Data on learning outcomes and tracking individual learners progress will be necessary at institutional, regional and national levels to inform decision making and policy interventions

## **ECE Management**

Paragraph 9 of Part 11 of the Fourth Schedule to the Constitution provides that free ECE is a function of county governments. County governments are, therefore, conferred with the mandate of ensuring the implementation of early childhood education within the counties. As per the pre-primary policy (June 2018) the Ministry continues supporting County governments by providing central coordination of early childhood education, incorporation of pre-primary education into

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<sup>1</sup> <https://kenyayote.com/what-is-competency-based-curriculum-cbc-in-kenya-detailed-illustration/>

basic education structure and integration of pre-primary education into the competency-based curriculum. Thus, policy and the planning as well as training part remains at the national level.

The country has a policy enforcing a mandatory 2 year pre-primary ECE (Ministry of Education 2017) as a readiness tool to join grade one. The counties have been given the responsibility to manage ECE under the 2010 constitution and have taken the roles of teacher employment, provision of materials and equipment and classroom construction. However, other stakeholders especially communities have a role in supporting the government in provision of early years and primary education.

ECD is structured in ways that parents have to play their role, the county government has to play its role and the teachers have their role, so that this right is ensured.

### **Access to ECE**

Kenya has achieved relatively high ECDE enrollment over the recent time. According to World Bank, net enrolment in pre-primary education increased from 33 percent in 2005 to 72 percent in 2014, and up to 1045 in 2019, one of the highest enrollment rates in Sub-Saharan Africa. The number of pre-primary learning centres increased from 41,779 in 2017 to 46,530 as at 2019. There are 2.7 million learners in pre-primary centres (as at 2019) aged 4 and 5 years<sup>2</sup>. Although the Constitution states that pre-primary education should be free, communities and parents have provided the majority of financing for ECDE services in recent decades, primarily in the form of fees that pay for teacher salaries<sup>3</sup>. However, this burden is slowly being relieved from parents as a new constitution that placed ECE under the devolved county governments is being implemented. Most county governments have taken over payment of teachers from parents although unfortunately some counties are paying teachers poorly hence parents have to top up; with some constructing ECD centres and providing teaching learning materials. These rapid increase in access to early learning opportunities can be attributed to the county governments. Still, there is high turnover of ECE teachers to other occupations in most counties as the salaries are still low compared to those of teachers at the other levels (MoE, 2018) – National Strategic Plan 2018-2022.

### **Leaving some children behind**

All 193 United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>4</sup>, they made a pledge to ensure ‘no one will be left behind’ and to ‘endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.’ In practice, this means taking explicit action to end extreme poverty, curb inequalities, confront discrimination and fast-track progress for the furthest behind.

Despite the rapid growth in ECE, some children in Kenya are still left behind due to various social cultural and environmental reasons.

Some of the children left behind include:

**Slum areas:** Informal settlements make up to 47% of the population in urban centers such as Nairobi<sup>5</sup>. ECE centers in the slums are mainly run by church groups and charities as public

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.education.go.ke/images/REPORTS/Basic-Education-Statistical-Booklet---2016.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> World Bank 2016. Scaling up preschool in Kenya: Costs, constraints and opportunities

<sup>4</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

<sup>5</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.SLUM.UR.ZS?locations=KE>

ECDs cannot cope with the population numbers. Many private providers also run ECE provision as a business, mainly in congested shanties<sup>6</sup>. Teacher payment is a problem and parents can barely afford to pay school fees of about 2 dollars a month<sup>7</sup>. The ECDs lack teaching and learning materials or a feeding program. In public ECDs, the government pays the teachers a salary. However, some non-state actors such as UNICEF do provide assistance in some of the centers. Research indicates that preschools can be found on many streets in slum neighborhoods. Over 80% of 4 and 5 year olds in the Mukuru area<sup>8</sup> are attending preschools, with no significant gender gap. Children in the poorest quintiles still have participation rates over 70%. These high attendance figures are achieved despite the fact that 41% of the 3-6 year-old in the area live in households with a daily income of less than \$2.50 per capita. All school-related costs come to about KES 1,500 (\$18) per month per child on average<sup>9</sup>. The preschool sector is largely dominated by the growing private school industry: an estimated 94% of preschool students in the study area of Mukuru were attending private preschools, partly because public schools were lacking. The main challenge is the poor sanitation, crowded environment, academic orientation for very young children, poorly paid teachers, some unqualified teachers, lack of play and learning materials and equipment, including adequate playing field. Teachers plays a key role in cognitive and socio-emotional development in ECD and a high child teacher ratio and an unmotivated teacher negatively affects the interactions <sup>10</sup>

Due to high population especially in slums and densely populated rural areas there is a problem of poor infrastructure. However, parents prefer to have their child in an ECD somewhere rather than at home. There problem of infrastructure arises where anybody can put up a commercial ECE center in a church, shopping center, slum area etc. An ECD bill is in progress where government will require entrepreneurs to put facilities in place first and ensure those facilities have been inspected, meet the requirements of the health officer and public works for better regulation. However, it will be important to have adequate independent quality checks to ensure that the problem of corruption does not compromise the quality of ECE facilities and services.

The slum schools have inadequate teaching and learning materials, limited play spaces and play equipment.<sup>11</sup> Children learn through play and shortage of teaching and learning materials for children to manipulate is great disservice to children. This is a common challenge in most ECE centers. Government has been encouraging parents to collaborate with teachers in providing these materials

**Pastoralist/Nomadic children:** Over 80% of Kenya's lands are classified as arid and semi-arid (ASAL), based on the relatively low amounts of annual rainfall received. Often marginalized, and with high rates of poverty, the 30% of Kenyans residing in these areas earn their living

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<sup>6</sup> Karanja M (2015) Determinants of cognitive and socio-emotional development in preschool children in informal urban settlements

<sup>7</sup> Kenyan Nomads welcome Nomadic Schools.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2010/jan/20/kenya-mobile-schools-initiative>

<sup>8</sup> Mukuru is one of the slum areas in Nairobi

<sup>9</sup> Exploring Early Education Programs in Peri-urban Settings in Africa: Nairobi, Kenya.

<https://www.poverty-action.org/study/exploring-early-education-programs-peri-urban-settings-africa-nairobi-kenya>

<sup>10</sup> Karanja Michael (2015). Determinants of cognitive and socio-emotional development in preschool children in informal urban settlements

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018-06-20-government-launches-policy-to-guide-pre-primary-education/>

principally through a mix of pastoralism and small-scale agriculture<sup>12</sup>. ASALs are particularly susceptible to droughts and flooding, and with increasing impacts from climate change, these areas are considered to be at risk of desertification. Moreover, a large percentage of ASALs have been degraded from deforestation and overgrazing, which further reduces the productivity of these lands, threatening food security, livelihoods and biodiversity. Children from Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALS) counties are majorly engaged in nomadic pastoralists' activities and lifestyle hence have a low participation in formal school attendance and learning practices. Provision of formal education in pastoralist areas has been challenging. Mobile schools are recommended and their adoption faces challenges especially getting qualified teachers for nomadic schools. The concept of mobile schools has its origin from six objectives of EFA and other section of Dakar Framework of Action and the INEE Minimum Standards (2010 [Dormain Two]) which hints on Access and Learning Environments. The few teachers with a nomadic background makes recruitment, deployment and retention of teachers' difficult.<sup>13</sup> Given these challenges, many pastoralist children are missing out on the benefits of early learning.

**Religious schools:** The religious schools are rampant in Muslim-dominated areas of Coast and North Eastern Kenya<sup>14</sup> and take the form of madrassas and dugsis. A madrassa is an informal educational institute where Islamic studies are imparted to the pupils. Kenya has about 1,000 madrassas spread across the country but with a concentration in the northern and coastal regions. During madrassa lessons, children are taught how to read the Quran mainly through rote learning. The importance of madrasa is underlined by its religious and moral training of its learners. The Aga Khan Foundation has promoted the integration of religious values and secular content with quality pre-primary schools offering holistic development opportunities to young children in the Madrassas with great success in the region. Through its Whole School Approach, the Foundation has supported over 1,050 community-based pre-schools attached to public primary schools, benefiting over 350,000 children.<sup>15</sup> However, some madrassas are still practicing Koranic teaching alone and some imams have been accused of radicalizing children using unregulated curriculum, a dangerous trend given Kenya's proximity to Somalia and destruction been caused in terror attacks. Failure by the government to have a unified Islamic madrassa studies curriculum has left opportunities open for extremist clerics to indoctrinate children. More so, such children lack wholistic early learning and miss out on the benefits. As a staff at AKF's Madrassa Resource Center says, under the madrassa religious programme that is not integrated, children would transit to class one and were not able to compete verbally with the others who went to preschool. Over time there were many Muslim drop outs and very few Muslims could complete school and enter university<sup>16</sup>.

### Other challenges in Early learning

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<sup>12</sup> IUCN. Kenya: Arid and semi-arid lands. <https://www.iucn.org/restoration-initiative/projects/kenya-arid-and-semi-arid-lands>

<sup>13</sup> Wangu M 2013: Factors Influencing Provision of Education For Pastoralists Children In Mobile Primary Schools in Marsabit North District, Kenya

<sup>14</sup> <https://su-plus.strathmore.edu/bitstream/handle/11071/3733/Rural%20madrassas%20of%20the%20southern%20Kenya%20coast,%201971-92.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>15</sup> Early Childhood Development. <https://www.akdn.org/where-we-work/eastern-africa/kenya/early-childhood-development-kenya>

<sup>16</sup> <https://theirworld.org/voices/madrassa-early-childhood-programme-kenya-helps-communities>

**Testing and examinations in ECE centers:** Parents demand their children learn to read and write at a very young age. The current ECE bill prohibits certain actions such as administration of examinations of admission and holding back of pupils. The government has introduced competency based curriculum that discourages examinations and grading of pupils in ECE and lower grades. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development has developed ECD curriculum for the whole country which is important to make ECDE standards across the counties. However, counties have a role in adapting the implementation of the curricula as there are certain peculiarities on mother tongue, cultures and among others. The County Executive Member in charge of Education works with KIE on these specifics.

**Child nutrition:** Many ECE centers lack a consistent feeding program where children are provided a snack. A hungry child cannot learn. According to MoE (2018), “pupils attending schools with regular meals perform better than those attending schools with no feeding programme. Also, pupils who get regular meals (at least two and more) at home, do better than those who receive fewer meals” (p. 20). Some counties have been providing the snack but this is irregular and is determined by availability of resources. In some places, parents chip in to provide the snack. Therefore, there is need for all counties to collaborate with parents in order to come up with modalities of providing regular snacks to all learners for better performance.

**Poor teacher remuneration:** Many counties have taken up payment of ECE teachers but their pay is low, on an average of 100 dollars a month. ECE teachers are among the lowest paid cadre of workers in the country. However, some counties are developing schemes of service and have started paying their teachers better, in some cases doubling the average amount. Teachers in the private ECEs especially in the low income areas are still grossly underpaid, some as low as 15 dollars a month. This causes low motivation. A teacher with a low motivation cannot motivate her children well to learn and play.

**High cost of ECE for poor families:** Poor families can barely afford education for their ECD children especially in a private center. Some public ECDs also charge some money as most counties only pay the teacher without providing other necessities.

### **Recent empirical evidence on benefits of ECE in Kenya**

The Kenya Government introduced ‘Tayari’ program in 2014, an early childhood education programme – a Kiswahili word that means “readiness”<sup>17</sup>. It was piloted over four years in more than 1800 public and private early childhood development and education centers. Tayari reached slightly over 72 000 pre-primary school learners.

Tayari’s aim was to develop a cost-effective, scalable model of early childhood development and education that would prepare children cognitively, physically, socially and emotionally for primary school. The model had three interrelated components.

- i) Teacher training and classroom support.
- ii) Providing teachers and learners with appropriate instructional materials like learners’ work books and teacher guides.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://shared.rti.org/content/tayari-pre-primary-program-kenya-getting-children-ready-primary-school-outcome-evaluation>

- iii) Health and hygiene knowledge, making children aware of why hand washing and healthy foods are important.<sup>18</sup>

An external evaluation by APHRC in 2018<sup>19</sup> found that the learners who were exposed to Tayari were more ready to join primary grade 1 compared to those not involved in the programme. The Tayari model provides an opportunity to improve the quality of childhood learning in sub-Saharan Africa. It is flexible and can be tweaked to fit different contexts.

The study found Tayari programme to be cost-effective. By spending an extra US \$14 per learner over a period of two years – that is, about US \$7 a year – policymakers could enhance learners' scores in early childhood development and education centres by an average of about 3 percentage points.

With a budget of US \$7 million per year, the government can heavily subsidize the cost of 1 million learners in early childhood education in a way that will improve the quality and make the learners ready to join primary grade 1.

## **Conclusion**

To ensure we achieve the SDG on ECD, it is important to ensure basic requirements for quality ECE for instance qualified teachers, basic ECD infrastructure which is clean and safe and play and learning materials.

- More supervision of ECE centers by government to ensure quality and cessation of poor practices such as testing, and ensure curriculum guidance
- Government support to private ECE entrepreneurs by easing registration regulations– and poor parents enrolling their children in private ECEs through a voucher system (as the government facilities are not enough for all children)
- Consider double shifts to ease classroom congestion, especially during the COVID-19 period
- Ensure no child is left behind by providing more support to disadvantaged counties especially those in ASAL areas – nomadic communities and children in slum areas.

**Conclusion?** If you wish to have the recommendations as a conclusion, then you may need to remove the bullets – make it a paragraph.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://theconversation.com/kenyan-approach-holds-promise-for-boosting-early-childhood-education-110194>

<sup>19</sup> <https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/library/impact-evaluation-of-tayari-school-readiness-program-in-kenya-endline-report>

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