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Abstract
Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) is the bedrock and foundation of all learning in the life of any child. There is a very close relationship between Early Childhood Education and schooling completion rates. It’s said that a child who goes through ECD learning successfully has higher chances of successfully going through primary and secondary education. To achieve Education for All (EFA), the Government has undertaken various measures and is instituting reforms to address challenges related to access, equity, quality and relevance. Access and Equity remain key to the government’s commitment to fighting illiteracy as well as eradicating poverty since independence. There are recorded challenges that communities have encountered in the provision of Early Childhood Education services to their children. This paper discusses the policies and practices that have been put in place to promote access and equity to Early Childhood Development Education by the government. The paper will endeavour to examine the challenges facing the implementation of the same policies as well as the challenges facing the ECDE teacher education which is key to capacity building in the ECDE sector. The paper has lots of significance to ECDE policy maker who need to enforce the ECDE policies as opposed to the way the policy is being practiced. The ECDE children stand to benefit since the policies and practice will be in tandem. The transformation of society can’t be complete if the ECDE sector appears to be forgotten; hence national development remains a dream. The worrying reality however is the constant low levels of community involvement in the implementation of the policies that concern access and equity. The paper concludes that ECDE being bedrock to the foundation of learning, serious considerations on equity, access and practice need to be enforced in order to benefit the child.

Keywords: equity, access, policy frame work, mainstreaming, quality.

INTRODUCTION
The attainment of EFA by 2015 is a major goal and commitment of the Government in line with the right to education for all Kenyans. For the children of primary school age, this right is provided for in law (Children’s Act 2001) and in other official documents on education policies. This is also in line with the Government’s commitment to international declarations, protocols and conventions as resolved in world conferences on EFA (Jomtien-Thailand, 1990, and Dakar-Senegal, 2000) and, by the MDGs.

To achieve EFA, the Government has undertaken various measures and is instituting reforms to address challenges related to access, equity, quality and relevance. A lot of funds have been invested through the Kenya Education Sub-Sector Support Programme (KESSP) since the ECDE programme is listed as Programme number 1.

This paper is set to examine the following areas: the importance of ECDE to the national development, the objectives of ECDE in Kenya, policies that promote access and equity in ECDE in Kenya, challenges facing the provision of quality ECDE services in Kenya and recommendations.

Statement of the Problem
The levels of awareness on the importance and availability of ECDE services in Kenya is commendable. The fact that the government has developed the ECDE policy (ECDE Policy Framework, 2006) is a clear sign of the commitment of the government to ensure quality of the ECDE services. Many service providers are interested in establishing ECDE centres to Kenya children. It is apparently clear that the practice of the ECDE services is almost a contradiction from the policy in relation to access, equity and specific policy issues.

Importance of the Study to Scholars and Readers
The study is set to contribute to the existing knowledge to the fact that in developing countries, there are glaring disparities in the policy statements and the practice of ECDE services which have implications on equity, access and even the capacity building of the service providers. The readers need to appreciate the fact that continuous advocacy and lobbying need to be enforced to have the ECDE teachers employed in order to ensure quality provision of this noble service.
Limitations of the Study
The study was affected by the following limitations:
- Lack of adequate finances to exhaustively address all the related issues
- Lack of adequate time for exhaustive consultations with all the stakeholders involved in the ECDE su-sector
- An assumption that the ECDE services were available equally in all parts of the country

Importance of Early Childhood Education
Early childhood typically encompasses the 1st eight years in the life of an individual. The education given during these years of a child’s life plays a quite crucial role and helps in appropriate development of children. Early childhood education can be fundamentally termed as “Learning through play”. Recent study have shown that early eight years in any children life are essential time since during this phase their brain develops and much of its ‘wiring’ is laid down. The education experiences and relationships a child has along with nutrition can truly affect child mental growth enormously. Although great early childhood education helps the brain to develop in healthy methods, improper education or study with out play on other hand may well affect brain development in distinct manner. So the experiences and the learning of a child in early years can support them in their whole life.

Recent studies of early childhood education have even shown some remarkable success. Its resulting effects on child motivation and learning power lasts for a long time. Nowadays where education has turn into quite critical role to play in a society, it is not correct to postpone investing in youngsters’ education until they become adults, nor wait till they reach school age. In reality early childhood is a vital phase of life in terms of a child’s intellectual, emotional and social development. Besides this, the most important point to know is that the growth of mental abilities is at an astounding rate and high proportion of learning takes location during this period.

It is very crucial for each and every parent to recognize that a child spends first eight years in realization of his or her own identity. These are extremely crucial years when children gain a sense of self and learn to associate themselves with the people around them. They develop an understanding and behavior to a specific extent. For this reason it is suggested that early childhood education during these years must be a lot more focused on teaching children about the world around them by way of play and establish the links. Moreover, quite a few child development professionals also agree that play is very crucial in the learning and emotional development of youngsters. A play can be multi-facet and usually helps in educating distinct abilities in children. In addition to this, education via play also helps them understand social skills, and develop values and ethics.

Surely, right now it won’t be wrong to say that early childhood education is the key element that helps in building a god foundation for child’s educational success. Every child learns habit and form patterns that are not simply changed in later years. If parents andeducators can develop productive early education patterns for the youngsters in their charge, those kids will be on their way to achieving great educational success. The lack of parental interaction throughout early childhood can negatively impact a child’s development. Ultimately it is the equal responsibility of the parents and tutors to assure the children have a great early childhood education that can further help them develop their personalities.

The Kenya ECDE Policy Framework (2006) further identifies the following as the benefits of investing in the early years:
Because of the proven importance of the early years, Kenya would reap substantial benefits with increased investment in programs for infants and children. Some of the benefits of such investment include:
(a) Early identification and intervention. At least 17% of children throughout the world have special needs because of disabilities, and a larger proportion is vulnerable because of discrimination and marginalization. Opportunities for early identification and intervention of vulnerable children, especially those with special needs, ensure that these children maximize their potential and contribute according to their talents.
(b) Enhanced enrolment in primary schools on equal grounds. Free primary education has increased the potential for all children to attend school. However, all children need to be equally “ready to learn” and to hence maximize their opportunities within the FPE; therefore, the aim is to have 100% participation in ECDE to ensure an adequate foundation for education. Presently, there is low access to pre-schools (40% nationally and in some districts less that 20%) necessitating increased support for this age sector.
(c) Increase productivity. Parents will be supported adequately so that they are able to raise children who are healthy and who will grow up to be productive and to contribute effectively to their families, communities and the nation. In addition, normally functioning children will be able to appreciate those with disabilities and treat them as equals, thus enhancing the status and potential of children with special needs.
(d) Cost savings for both the families and the nation. Increased investments in this sub-sector will support parents so that they are able to provide quality care for their children. Quality care will translate into children being healthier. They will have
fewer incidences of disease. They will also have better academic performance and fewer school dropouts and repetition as a result of having been exposed to stimulating learning experiences both at home and in the early childhood development (ECD) centres. The money saved by families and the Government in health care and education services could be used in development programs. (Schwinhart and Weirfart, 1980).

(e) Reduction of poverty. Quality early childhood development experiences contribute to more productive human resources because children who are exposed to such experiences have better success in school and hence they grow up to get better paying jobs when they enter the labour market. Such adults have higher living standards.

(f) Reduction of social inequalities. Quality early childhood development programs help children with special needs and those from poor families to maximize their potential, minimize the progression of disabilities and get out of the cycle of poverty. When children with special needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are exposed to stimulating early childhood development experiences, their placement, retention and academic performance are enhanced. This means that they are more likely to enter at the right time and complete school successfully, get better paying jobs and therefore live higher quality lives.

(g) Improved chances for the girl child. Girls who enroll in early childhood development centres are more likely to proceed to primary school and higher levels of formal education. This is because their parents have been sensitized on the importance of formal education for both boys and girls through parental and community education programs.

(h) Improved moral values in the community. Increased investment during this period will support parents so that they are able to inculcate values and morals in their children. The window of moral and values training is open during the early years. Such children tend to grow up to be disciplined, well-adjusted, socially and morally upright youth and adults.

(i) Improved family welfare. Parents and communities acquire more knowledge, skills and positive attitudes on various issues especially those related to the causes and prevention of disabilities, and the needs and rights of children as well as families. This helps to improve the welfare of children and families as well as develop positive attitudes on various issues, especially those related to learners with special needs and their roles within the family. Parental and community education training carried out within the early childhood development programs contributes to community development.

(j) Increased opportunities for parental and community empowerment. Early childhood development programs offer very good opportunities for mobilizing and empowering parents and local communities. In addition, parental and community mobilization programs provide good opportunities for creating awareness on other development issues, for example those relating to various methods of improving living standards.

Objectives of Early Childhood Development Education in Kenya

The Kenya Institute of Education Syllabus (2008) for Early Childhood Development Education has identified the following as the objectives of the ECDE:

1. Provide education geared towards development of the child’s mental capabilities and physical growth;
2. Enable the child enjoy living and learning through play;
3. Develop the child’s self-awareness, self esteem and self-confidence;
4. Enable the child to develop understanding and appreciation of his/her culture and environment;
5. Foster the child’s exploration skills, creativity, self-expression and discovery;
6. Identify children with special needs and align them with existing services;
7. Enable the child build good habits and acquire acceptable values and behaviors for effective living as an individual and a member of a group;
8. Foster the spiritual and moral growth of the child;
9. Improve the status of the child’s health, care and nutritional needs, and link him/her with health services such as immunization, health check-ups and growth and monitoring;
10. Enrich the child’s experiences to enable him/her to cope better with primary school life;
11. Develop the child’s aesthetic and artistic skills.

The achievement of these objectives however faces a myriad of challenges as will be discussed later in this paper.

Policies that promote Access and Equity in Early Childhood Development and Education in Kenya

The provision of ECDE involves households, community and Government efforts in the integrated development of children from the time of conception. The structure of ECDE provision is divided into that for 0-3 year-old children and for 4-5 year-old children. For this sub-sector, the MOE’s policy focuses on 4-5 year-old children with a view to providing a holistic and integrated programme that meets the child’s cognitive, social, moral, spiritual, emotional and physical needs.

The Government is already implementing measures that seek to improve the performance of this sub-sector. These include:
establishing guidelines and standards for the management, supervision and curriculum development for ECDE;
- Establishment of NACECE and District Centres for Early Childhood Education (DICECE) for purposes of in-service training of trainers;
- mobilizing communities and parents through awareness creation, and providing community support grants to support marginalized/vulnerable communities in collaboration with other partners. Other measures, which are being implemented to enhance quality at this level, include,
- implementing a 2-year in-service training programme for ECDE teachers;
- mounting a 9-month training of trainers’ course;
- developing guidelines and syllabuses for ECDE programmes;
- enhancing the capacity of supervisors and inspectors to ensure quality of ECDE programmes; and
- equipping NACECE and DICECEs to meet the needs of the programmes.

To implement the above policies, the Government committed itself to employ the following strategies:
(i) Work with partners in the development of a legal framework for the ECDE policy;
(ii) Design a programme to build community capacities for the development and equipment of ECDE centres in partnership with other stakeholders;
(iii) Build partnerships with parents, sponsors, private sector and other state agencies to promote the development of ECDE;
(iv) Set quality standards and publicize the same among all service providers;
(v) Develop and implement appropriate ECDE programmes for children with special needs, including the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups;
(vi) Undertake regular review of the curriculum to ensure inclusion of emerging issues and alternative approaches to early childhood education;
(vii) Standardize training and certification of ECDE teachers in consultation with other partners;
(viii) Develop and implement a monitoring and evaluation system to enhance quality assurance;
(ix) Revise pre-service training curriculum for primary teachers to prepare teachers on appropriate methodology for teaching ECDE and lower primary classes;
(x) Develop a scheme of service for ECDE teachers;
(xi) Liaise with other partners in education, particularly the local authorities, to improve salaries and terms of service for ECDE teachers; and
(xii) Continue to network with other service providers who focus on childcare and education for children from conception to 3 years.

Challenges facing the Provision of ECDE Services in Kenya
Despite the above measures, access, equity and quality in the ECDE sub-sector remain constrained by various factors that include:
- limited teaching and learning materials,
- inadequate ECDE centres,
- inadequate community participation;
- lack of a clear policy on transition from pre-primary to primary school;
- inadequate nutrition and health services;
- lack of enough trained teachers;
- Low and irregular salaries for ECDE teachers and lack of clear entry age guidelines.

Challenges to the Training of ECDE Teachers in Kenya
The potential for early childhood education and development practices in Kenya is great, especially given the MOE’s expanded mandate to cater for the early care, development, and education needs of young children. Additionally, there has been increased awareness with regard to the importance of an integrated approach to the holistic development of the child. However, there are some perceived problems and challenges that need to be addressed along various dimensions:

- The early childhood development program has placed too much emphasis on a center-based model, while neglecting alternative models which may increase access and may be more appropriate for certain populations. Such communities include the slum areas, rural areas and the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL) of Kenya.
- In addition, the Free Primary Education Policy has had a negative impact on access to ECD services. Many parents do not want to pay for the education and care of children who are under 5 when education is “free” for 6-year-olds. As a consequence, many preschool children are not benefiting from preschool experiences since their parents tend to keep them home until they reach the entitlement age for FPE (Anonymous, 2003). As a result, many preschool teachers who depend on parental support for salaries leave the profession due to poor and irregular pay.
- The issue of participation poses a challenge since regional and gender disparities in access to early childhood development impact on preschool gross enrollment rates (GER).

For example, North Eastern Province has a GER of 11.2% for boys and 8.2% for girls, compared to Nairobi’s 105.7% of GER for boys and 107.2% for girls (UNESCO/OECD, 2005), the high GER in Nairobi means that there are many underage and overage children enrolled in ECD centers. This phenomenon points to the difficulty of delivering quality
ECD services since it denies the preschool teachers the opportunity to practice what they have been trained to do.

- The *Syllabus for ECD in Kenya* are not accessible to all teachers, while the competencies and services for children under 3 are not well developed. The Guidelines are not readily available to teachers, resulting in a lack of adherence to a set of standards for guiding professional practice.

- Additionally, some preschools overemphasize formal learning skills at the expense of a play-paradigm curriculum. This may be attributed to the demands by parents who insist on a more academic curriculum at the preprimary level. As in many countries around the world, there is little professional recognition of preschool teachers in Kenya, leading to poor self-esteem and a lack of awareness in local communities regarding teachers’ needs. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of formal policy linking ECD to primary education.

- Finally, the provision of basic needs and services to ECD teachers in disadvantaged areas and communities such as the ASAL is lacking.

CONCLUSION
In summary, Early Childhood Education has, for a long time, been at the periphery of the education programming in Kenya. It was formerly considered as social rather than an education activity. There are no specific budget allocations for ECE, except for school inspection and minimal amounts for teacher training. Parents and the community, therefore, have to provide learning facilities and materials, somehow take care of the teacher, and generally run the programme. All these factors have serious implications for the cognitive development of the child at this foundational level. The importance of building this foundation should be reflected in adequate government allocation for ECD teacher payment and training. If this happens, then Kenya would be taking a giant step towards the right track in quality of learning environment at its ECD level. Further, as indicated in the EFA Global Report of 2002, the extent of early childhood care and education (ECCE) is still relatively an uncharted territory. Comparative data in this area from diverse social, geographical and other significant areas of the country and regions need to be collected. Thus, there is need for serious research in this area.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Having examined the ECDE objectives, policies and challenges to the access and equity of ECDE services, the paper wishes to suggest the following recommendations to the government, development partners and stakeholders:

- Endorse and disseminate learning comfort norms and learning environmental health standards for all ECD centres.
- Ensure a focus on the holistic development of the child. The interventions by NGOs are often entitled ECD Health and Nutrition. Due to this, it is quite possible to focus on health related interventions and forget the cognitive aspects of child development. On the other hand, government driven interventions are geared towards cognitive achievements and may easily overlook the health and nutrition aspects.
- Identify, promote and disseminate the best package of health, nutrition and education interventions from among practices known to improve the lives of children, and which can be delivered at the ECD centres.
- Examine the possibility of instituting an ECD equipment scheme.
- Search for durable approaches for providing relevant instructional materials.
- Facilitate the raising of awareness of local communities about teachers’ needs.
- Determine and review ECD teachers’ salaries and conditions of services.
- Ensure provision of basic needs and services to ECD teachers in disadvantaged areas and communities.

- The government should also make preschool education for age 5+ free and compulsory, and pay the salaries of teachers who handle these classes. In order to increase access to ECDE training for teachers in ASAL, the minimum requirement for admission into the ECD programs needs to be adjusted. Equally, there needs to be a review of the existing curriculum to accommodate the integration of children with disabilities.

- Finally, the existing gaps in implementation of the World Bank Project’s vision of expanding ECD to age 8 and creating linkages between ECD and formal schooling, need to be revisited with a view to creating policy statements that reflect the reality that ECD training caters to children up to age 6. This approach would allow for more systematic training of ECD teachers that could harmonize preschools with primary schools and could offer job security for preschool teachers and sustainability of ECD centers.

REFERENCE


