

**DEVOLVING EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION IN KENYA:
POLICY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES.**

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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. The importance of ECDE as key milestone in the development of a personality cannot be gainsaid. With the advent of the implementation of the Constitution of Kenya (2010), the devolution process heralded the devolution of pre-school among other devolved functions of the county governments. This paper is set to examine the policy and planning issues arising out of the devolution process. The paper will examine the importance of investing in ECDE as a county and the national objectives of ECDE as a yardstick of implementation. The paper will highlight the basic principles of the ECDE policy framework in Kenya. The paper will then delve into the policy challenges of devolving ECDE to the county governments. The paper will also take a glimpse into the opportunities that have go with the devolution of ECDE services to counties. The paper will seek to conclude that when the challenges bedeviling devolution of the ECDE sub-sector will be overcome, the opportunities touch on the betterment of almost all households in rural and urban Kenya.

Key Words: Devolution, Policy, Challenges, Opportunities, ECDE Objectives, Counties

Introduction

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a very crucial stage in Child Growth and Development. This fact has been emphasized by most founders of Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE), especially Johann Froebel, Heinrich Pestalozzi and John Dewey among others. Early childhood is a crucial stage of life in terms of a child's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Growth of mental and physical abilities progress at an astounding rate and a very high proportion of learning take place from birth to age six. It is a time when children need high quality personal care and learning experiences.

Importance of the early years of development

The World Conference on Education for All (EFA) that took place in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990, articulated the significance of the early years as the foundation for the life of an individual. These deliberations have been corroborated by recent research on brain development (especially Shore Rima, 1997; Mustard, 1998; O'Donnell, 1999; Stephens, 1999), which emphasizes that the first six years of life are extremely important because:

- The environmental experiences during this period are significant in influencing one's life. The experiences of this period are known to either enhance or inhibit realization of one's potential in life.
- This is also the fastest period of growth and development in all aspects.
- The development of the brain is most rapid in the early years. By the second year of life the brain of the child is 70% of an adult brain. By six years of age it reaches 90% of its adult weight and size. In addition, by the end of six years the brain of the child has developed maximum connections, more than an individual will require in a lifetime. All that is left is to make these connections permanent through providing early stimulation and quality care.
- All the "critical windows of opportunity" are open during this period. These are the periods when children are able to learn and acquire certain knowledge, skills and attitudes very quickly with minimal effort. Parents, other caregivers and teachers need to make use of this period in order to maximize children's holistic development and, therefore, their potential in life.
- This is the period when the brain is most malleable and also highly impressionable. Environmental influences, especially care, nurture and stimulation, have the greatest impact on the brain.
- This is the period when it is very easy to mould the character of children by inculcating social norms, values and habits as well as regulation and control of emotions.
- This is a vital period for ensuring proper physiological growth and a crucial period for significant health and nutrition interventions to put the child on the right track for life.

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:

- **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.
- **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 than 20%) necessitating increased support for this age sector.

- **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.
- **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 Weirlart, 1980).
- **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.
- **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.
- **Improved chances for the girl child.** Girls who enrol 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 sensitised on the importance of formal education for both boys and girls through parental and community education programs.
- **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.

- **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.
- **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.

Principles of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy Framework in Kenya

The ECD Policy Framework is based on principles that are universally accepted as forming the cornerstone of quality early childhood development services and programs, as follows:

- The policy ensures that the holistic needs of young children are met to maximise the realisation of their full potential.
- The policy must safeguard the rights and welfare of the child as per the Children Act of 2001.
- The policy must be a partnership of all Government ministries and other partners offering services and programs for infants and children.
- The policy must be child-centred, recognising that children are voiceless, but they are also active participants and learners in shaping the events that influence their lives.
- The policy must recognise and appreciate parents and families as the primary caregivers and health providers of their children, and hence they need to be empowered and supported to ensure they are effective in their roles.
- The policy must support and strengthen the community-based management of early childhood services for sustainable development.
- The policy must address the issues of vulnerable and marginalized children, especially children with special needs, and provide affirmative action for them.
- The policy must ensure non-discrimination of children and families on the basis of gender, race, colour, religion, economic status, disability and health status.
- The policy must recognise that life begins at conception and mental development, just like physical growth, starts before birth and continues throughout life.

GENERAL EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION OBJECTIVES IN KENYA

Early Childhood Development in Kenya should;

The ECDE policy spells out the following as objectives that should be achieved by offering the ECDE services to the Kenyan children:

- Provide education geared towards development of the child's mental capabilities and physical growth;
- Enable the child enjoy living and learning through play;
- Develop the child's self-esteem and self-confidence;
- Enable the child to develop understanding and appreciation of his/her culture and environment;
- Foster the child's exploration skills, creativity, self-expression and discovery;
- Identify children with special ' needs and align them with existing services;
- Enable the child build good habits and acquire acceptable values and behaviours for effective living as an individual and a member of a group;
- Foster the spiritual and moral growth of the child
- 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 growth and monitoring;
- Enrich the child's experiences to enable him/her to cope better with primary school life;
- Develop the child's aesthetic and artistic skills. This handbook is meant to enable pre-school teachers to interpret and utilize the ECDE syllabus more effectively when delivering ECDE curriculum.

DEVOLUTION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA

The Constitution of Kenya (2010) establishes government at two levels, National and County governments. Article 6(1) divides the territory of Kenya into 47 counties. Therefore, Kenya is transiting from a centralized government to devolved system of government. The Constitution establishes a devolved system of governance in accordance with the objects and Principles of devolution as articulated by Articles 174 and 175.

The **Constitution of Kenya** is the supreme guiding law on education. It contains provisions that have various implications for the education sector. Article 43[f] of the Constitution says that every person has a right to education; 53[1][b] every child has a right to free and compulsory basic education; 54[1] [b] A person with any disability is entitled to access educational institutions and facilities for persons with disabilities;55[a] The state shall take measures, including affirmative action Programmes, to ensure that youth access relevant education and training; Article 56 [b] the state shall put in place affirmative action programmes designed to ensure that minorities and the marginalized groups are provided special opportunities in educational and economic fields.

Currently, the education sector is also governed by the **Basic Education Act, 2013** and the **Sessional Paper No.14 of 2012** on Reforming Education and Training Sectors in Kenya. The Basic Education Act, 2013 aims at giving effect to article 53 of the Constitution, and to promote and

regulate free and compulsory basic education, provide for accreditation, and registration, governance and management of institutions of basic education. It also aims at providing for the establishment of the National Education Board, the Education Standards & Quality Assurance Commission and the County Education Board. The Basic education Act, 2013 also categorizes basic educational institutions into public and private schools. Public schools which are schools established, owned or operated by the Government and including sponsored schools while private schools as those established, owned or operated by private individuals, Entrepreneurs and institutions.

The passage of the Basic Education Act, 2013 has introduced new structures. These includes: National Education Board, the Education Standards & Quality Assurance Commission and the County Education Board.

The functions of the County Education Board shall be to:

- **oversee in consultation with the county government, the operation and management of youth polytechnics, pre-primary education including early childhood care and education programmes in the county;**
- Coordinate and monitor education and training *in the County on behalf of the national government and the county government; interpret national policies in education based on the county's needs;*
 - collaborate with the Board of Management, the *Principal, the Head Teacher, and other appropriate authorities in the management of basic schools;*
 - register and maintain a data bank of all education and *training institutions within the county;*
 - monitor curriculum implementation in basic education *in the county;*
 - put measures in place to ensure all children and youth *of school going age within the county attend and stay in to complete basic education;*
 - Monitor the conduct of examinations and assessments *at the basic education and training levels in the county in collaboration with all the relevant national bodies among others.*

The fourth schedule of the constitution places pre-primary education and child care facilities under the county governments. These roles are further specified by Section 26 of the Basic Education Act, 2012 which states that: The roles of the County Government will include the provision of funds required for the development of the necessary infrastructure for institutions of basic education and training used for conducting pre-primary education, childcare facilities, home craft centres and village polytechnics.

POLICY CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED IN DEVOLVING ECDE TO COUNTY GOVERNMENTS

The following challenges have been experienced with the advent of devolving ECDE services to the County Governments:

- **Teacher Management** – There appears to be a confusion as to whether the County Governments should hire and manage the ECDE teacher. This results from the fact that Teacher Management is the sole and constitutional responsibility of the Teachers Service Commission (TSC).
- **Access to ECE**- the ECDE Policy framework states that to improve on access, the ECDE children shouldn't walk for a distance of one kilometer in search of ECDE services. This had allowed ECDE centres to be started nearly in all neighbourhoods including in shops, under trees and even in peoples' homes. The County Governments may not provide funds to private ECDE centres to enable children to access ECDE services.
- **Quality and Standards** – The national government has been experiencing challenges in monitoring ECDE services. The DICECE officers are the employees of the TSC. There are no indicators that the county Governments have the modalities in place to monitor and maintain standards.
- **Teacher Education** – The training of ECDE Diploma and Certificate teachers has been the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Education. The county governments are claiming to want to control the teacher training component.
- **The ICT component** – the County Governments are in charge of ICT in the counties. It is expected that children will transit to the primary schools and work with the laptops. There is no clear policy as to the entry behavior of the children about ICT from the counties.
- **Children with Special Needs** – The component of Children with Special Needs and their education still remains the responsibility of the National Government. The county governments are yet to develop a policy that will address these needs at the ECDE level.
- **Centre Management Boards**– The Basic Education Act (2013) makes A provision for the Management Boards to be established in all ECDE Centres. It will be a challenge enforcing the provision at the centres that are not within the primary schools.
- **Enforcement of the ECDE Policy Framework (2006)** – The county governments seem to be busy preparing their own ECDE bills oblivious of the existing policy framework. This raises serious challenge on how the National Policy Framework will be fully implemented.
- **Appointment of Professionals** – The County Governments notoriously hired non-professionals as well the political favourites of the governors. This raises commitment issues to the proper future planning of the ECDE sector in Kenya.

- **Incorporation of the Non-Formal ECDE Centres into the mainstream ECDE management** in slum area remain a big challenge. They are yet to be incorporated in the Basic Education Act (2013).

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES WITH THE DEVOLUTION OF ECDE IN KENYA

- The involvement of the parents through the ECDE Centre Management Boards has been enhanced. The previous Education Act didn't have provisions for the ECDE representation on ECDE issues.
- ECDE teachers are assured of employment once policy issues are clarified.
- There will be resources for the development of ECDE Centres in most parts of the counties.
- ECDE is made part of Basic Education and enshrined into the constitution and the law. This makes ECDE compulsory for all children.
- The provision of health services through primary healthcare will be enhanced.
- The advocacy, campaigns and sensitization of stakeholders on the importance of ECDE will be enhanced.

CONCLUSION

Hailed as the great compromise of Kenya's new (2010) Constitution, devolution was one of the hallmarks of the transition from a previously centralized political system, which was largely blamed for vast inequality, exclusion and deep divisions in Kenyan society. A number of key steps have been taken as part of the constitutionally prescribed three year roll-out plan for devolved governments. The Constitution gives the county governments the executive and legislative authority and mandate to raise revenue, craft policies and make own budgets for the purpose of devolving services to the people. The County Governments need to rise up to the expectations and aspirations of the people of Kenya by addressing urgently the challenges realized by the devolved pre-school management on seize the opportunities brought about by devolution to meet the needs of the ECDE fraternity. This will go a long way to realize the importance of ECDE to the development of any society.

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