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High-Quality Early Childhood Development: Implementing Large-Scale Programs in Global Contexts

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This brief summarizes a longer Social Policy Report

Toward High-Quality Early Childhood Development Programs and Policies at a National Scale: Directions for Research in Global Contexts

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Why Does This Matter?

With decades of evidence to support early childhood development (ECD) programs and policies, investment in early childhood policies has expanded globally. Currently, more than 70 nations have national ECD laws, with most enacted in the last 20 years. However, the focus has been on access rather than quality. With these increased investments comes evidence that the capacity of policy and social service systems to support ECD—across health, education, social protection, and other sectors—is weak, with serious implications for children reaching their developmental potential.

The development of about 250 million children is at risk due to extreme poverty or stunting. Effective programs can support children's development, but must target risk level and be implemented at scale with high quality.

Background

- Decades of developmental, economic, and program evaluation research have resulted in a growing global consensus regarding the importance of investing in early childhood development.
- The United Nations recently incorporated high-quality ECD, care, and education for all children in its 2015-2030 Sustainable Development Goals, expanding the global policy agenda in ECD beyond infant and maternal mortality to include indicators for universal access to preprimary education and children's health, learning, and psychosocial well-being.
- Despite recent increases in investments, ensuring high-quality ECD services at scale— making sure all children have access to high-quality ECD services—remains a challenge.

Two facets of scaling must be addressed: how to build high-quality systems to support large-scale service provisions in places where such systems don't exist, and how to change behavior across existing systems to

improve quality.

- These aspects require new approaches to scaling, as both are complex.
- Two ways to work toward achieving high-quality programs at scale are: a small to bigger approach that includes bringing high-quality small-scale pilot initiatives to scale and expanding them to broader populations, and a big-to-better approach for programs that are at scale but require improvement.

What the Research Says

When considering improving quality while maximizing access, it is necessary to focus not just on the classroom or program but also on systems at the local, subnational, and national levels. The ECD field has a small, growing body of systems-level research to inform implementing integrated high-quality services at national scale. Issues that need to be addressed include:

- *Multisectoral coordination*: Unlike single-sector goals, maximizing developmental potential from the prenatal period to age 8 involves coordinating policies and programs across health, nutrition, education, social protection, and child-protection sectors.
- *A focus on quality at the systems level*: Despite agreement that quality across different government systems should be prioritized when scaling ECD programs, few systems are intentionally designed to support and monitor quality; most are oriented toward access.
- *Population-level demand*: Demand for specific services may be low and varied for ECD programs and policies that, while effective, are unfamiliar to families (e.g., home visiting).
- *Developmentally informed sequences of services and programs*: The rapid and significant changes that occur in the early years of development require programs and services that differentiate young children of varying ages and also consider transitions.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As nations invest in early childhood services, they should monitor systems-level factors. This means moving beyond simply authorizing spending to creating indicators of implementation quality at scale. Efforts to accurately record and track quality data should occur at multiple levels and across sectors. For example:

National Level

- A national plan, including a budget for services across sectors, standards for quality of services in each sector, and a strategy to monitor access and quality
- A coordinating body that convenes regularly with representation from different sectors
- A national data system to track budgeting, access, and quality across the geographic, political, and culturally diverse contexts of the country

Subnational Level

- Definitions for competencies specific to each sector's workforce
- Systems for training, onsite coaching, and supervision that addresses these competencies
- Data that flow from subnational to national levels and back to identify and address gaps in access and quality

Municipal or Local Level

- Monitoring preservice and inservice training in each sector locally to assure training supports positive family and developmental outcomes
- Monitoring daily responsibilities, routines, and behaviors in the early childhood workforce to assure alignment with quality standards

This brief summarizes a longer *Social Policy Report*, "Toward High-Quality Early Childhood Development Programs and Policies at a National Scale: Directions for Research in Global Contexts," by **Hirokazu Yoshikawa**, University Professor and Co-Director, Global TIES for Children Center, New York University; **Alice J. Wuermli**, Associate Director, Global TIES for Children Center, New York University; **Abbie Raikes**, Associate Professor of Early Childhood Development and Public Health, University of Nebraska; **Sharon Kim**, Research Affiliate, Global TIES for Children Center, New York University; and **Sarah B. Kabay**, Doctoral Candidate, International Education, New York University. This report is a product of the 2016 meeting, *Evidence for Scale: Research Methods to Support the Implementation of Quality Education and Early Childhood Development Programs at Large Scale in Global Contexts*, held at New York University Abu Dhabi Institute.