

Early childhood development and girls

Dr Joanne Ailwood, University of Newcastle, Australia

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Introduction

The international evidence that high quality early childhood development (ECD) programmes benefit all children's development, life experiences, and life chances, is overwhelming. The evidence comes from studies of all kinds, including well-known large quantitative longitudinal studies (e.g. High/Scope Perry studies in the USA and the work of Heckman, at <http://heckmanequation.org/>) to more localised qualitative case studies (e.g. [Ames, Rojas & Portugal, 2010](#); [Muthali, Mvula & Silo, 2014](#); [Save the Children, 2003](#)). As the HEART *Early Childhood Development Topic Guide* ([Woodhead et. al., 2014](#)) points out, early childhood development is an enormous field covering a range of sectors including early learning and education, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health, social protection and community. The ECD field extends across multiple sectors and spans the life period from conception through to eight years. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 aims to 'ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning' ([UN, 2015](#)). A key target within this goal is ensuring 'that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education' ([UN, 2015](#)).

For girls, it is often the intersection of multiple issues that create inequitable early life experiences. For example, growing up in a low-income country + being a girl + being rural + being the eldest sibling can equate to a significant level of inequity for the life experiences and chances of girls. This reading pack directs the reader to some of the key points raised in the wide-ranging body of research as they relate to ECD experiences and outcomes for girls. It describes a case study example of girls' ECD experiences, including what works, and then suggests readings and asks questions to provoke further questioning and discussion.

About the author

Dr Joanne Ailwood is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at the University of Newcastle, Australia. In her research, she reflects upon the nuances and complexities of early childhood education and care. Aspects of this work are historical and political, engaging in policy analysis and investigating broader historical, social and cultural contexts of families, women's paid work, care and childhood. More recent aspects of Jo's research are focused on the care and education relationship between parents and early childhood educators, including their understandings of their relationships not only with each other as adults, but also their place in the lives of the children they care for. Currently, Jo is working on a research and teacher training project involving a rural school in Zimbabwe, together with Dr Stephanie Bengtsson. This work in Zimbabwe is centred on school community development, and examines how local expertise and capacity can be harnessed to overcome the many challenges facing the Zimbabwean education system today.

ECD, girls and inequity

Attention to the gendered experiences of early childhood development requires a holistic focus. Girls and boys are born into different cultural, social and physical worlds. Indeed, boy preference may mean that a female foetus is not even allowed to be born. The 2007 UNESCO advocacy report points out, in the Asia Pacific region, '...boy preference results in more under-five deaths of girls due to poor care, aborting the female foetus and killing newborn girls' ([UNESCO, 2007, p. 4](#)). In Nepal, gender discrimination means that 10 girls die for every seven boys, and girls continue to be fed less, receive less health care, and have fewer chances to play ([Save the Children, 2003](#)). Such shortcomings, during the critical early childhood development years, continue to impact life chances through adolescence and into adulthood. For example, long-term nutritional disadvantage during the early childhood years translates to poor health as the girl moves into marriage and child-bearing age, which in turn impacts the next generation through low birth weights ([Yousafzai et al, 2013](#)).

More positively, longitudinal research by [Behrman and colleagues \(2009\)](#) suggests that nutritional diet supplements for girls under seven years had positive long-term and intergenerational effects through their eventual higher levels of maternal and infant health. Links between health and educational participation and success are demonstrated in India, where 'a pre-school health programme in Delhi increased average school participation by 7.7 percentage points for girls and 3.2 points for boys' ([Prpich, Zimanyi & Curtis, 2007, p. 10](#)).

Socially and culturally, at home and at school, adults tend to respond differently to girls and to boys ([Bosch, 2001](#); [UNGEI, 2010](#)). This means that adults interact with girls differently; parents often have higher expectations of girls' contributions to domestic labour and lower expectations of their right to an education. This lower expectation in terms of education can translate to fewer girls being enrolled in ECD programmes or at primary school, especially in rural areas. If they are enrolled they are more likely to miss days and are at a higher risk of dropping out ([Bosch, 2001](#); [UNGEI, 2010](#)). While in ECD settings or at school, girls are also likely to experience inequities in terms of curriculum content and delivery.

Girls who transitioned to primary schooling from a pre-school or other early childhood educational context are more likely to begin school at the usual school starting age (about six years) and were more likely to continue at school and be successful ([Ames, Rojas & Portugal, 2010](#); [Save the Children, 2003](#)). [Arnold et al \(2007\)](#) note evidence for the importance of before school educational experiences for girls from a number of countries including Brazil, India, Bangladesh and Jamaica.

Case studies

The case studies of Carmen and Cecilia below, taken from the *Young Lives* research in Peru ([Ames, Rojas & Portugal, 2010](#)) provide examples of how multiple factors intersect in the lives of girls to create inequities in their early childhood experiences. In the cases of Carmen and Cecilia there are three key points of intersection: geographical location, language of instruction, and school fees and other hidden costs. For the two girls, these key factors intersected in different ways, creating very different ECD experiences.

For Carmen, living in a rural context in Peru, the 'nearby' pre-school did not translate to being close enough, and her parents were understandably reluctant to take the risk of allowing their young girl to walk alone to and from school along the main road. Instead, they compensated by teaching her as best they could at home. Carmen's whole family is positive about education, and with their support she was prepared for the transition to primary school and felt excited about this major life event. During her first six months at school, Carmen had three teachers. As significant adults in a child's life, high teacher turnover is a concern. For Carmen, as a positive and engaged child with family support, the transition into primary schooling was generally good.

Cecilia is growing up in an urban context with ECD services close by. However, for Cecilia, the barrier to accessing this local ECD service was cost. Once Cecilia began primary school her experiences are not as positive as Carmen's. Her negative experiences tended to revolve around her siblings' negative reports and the level of physical punishment that she didn't understand, and that made her sad. So while Cecilia grew to enjoy school and learning, it seemed to be somewhat against the odds. A further barrier for

Cecilia is the language of instruction, which is not the same as her home language. Language is closely related to culture and this mismatch creates a further, and long-term, barrier for Cecilia.

What works for girls' ECD?

What works for girls' ECD is complex. As the case studies above illustrate, girls' experience ECD inequities through the intersection of various factors including, but not limited to, geographical location, poverty levels, and/or family and community expectations. To mitigate this, the number of barriers to access need to be reduced. Families and communities need clear, timely and relevant information about the importance and value of ECD for girls. As research in Nepal, Peru, Malawi and across Asia illustrates, ECD works best when parents and communities are supportive and understand the importance of the early years of a child's life ([Save the Children, 2003](#); [Ames, Rojas & Portugal, 2010](#); [UNGEI, 2010](#), [Munthali, Mvula, & Silo, 2014](#)). With family and community support there also needs to be accessible, affordable, and local ECD services particularly in rural and isolated areas. Once in an ECD site, girls should engage with qualified and consistent staff who have been trained in gender sensitivity. As in the case study of Carmen above, high teacher turnover and/or poorly qualified teachers is a significant barrier to quality ECD ([Ames, Rojas & Portugal, 2010](#)). Teacher training and ongoing professional support is a vital component of the ECD picture.

Gender sensitivity requires engagement with expectations for both girls and boys. While this reading pack focuses on ECD and girls, it is clear that quality early childhood development experiences that are valuable for girls also benefit boys, especially those boys who are most marginalised and vulnerable. For example, the elimination of the physical punishment of children by teachers would benefit all children. Whenever we focus on the specific effects of gender it is important to do so without reducing the debate to an unhelpful one of competing victims, where it becomes boys versus girls. If the effects of gendered expectations and practices are to be ameliorated, then it is necessary for men and women to work together as families, communities and educators. With this wide community support early childhood development experiences for all children can be positive, healthy and safe.

Key readings

Ames, P., Rojas, V., & Portugal, T. (2010). *Continuity and respect for diversity: Strengthening early transitions in Peru*. Working Paper No.56, Studies in Early Childhood Transitions. The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation. http://www.heart-resources.org/doc_lib/continuity-respect-diversity-strengthening-early-transitions-peru/

Summary: This paper reports on findings from the *Young Lives* research project. It explores the experiences of children transitioning from pre-primary education to primary school education in Peru. The researchers report on interviews with children, parents, and teachers to provide a detailed account of the wide variety of transition experiences. The case studies presented illustrate the complexity and diversity of transition experiences across Peru for young children and their families. While it is transitions into schooling that form the focus of this paper, several of the participating case study children are girls. The paper provides important insights into girls' experiences through interviewing the girls themselves. The paper concludes with recommendations for improving ECD in Peru.

Arnold, C. (2004). *Positioning ECCD in the 21st Century. The Coordinator's Notebook: An International Resource for Early Childhood Development*. Consultative Group's Annual Consultation, Turkey, Istanbul. http://www.heart-resources.org/doc_lib/positioning-eccd-21st-century/

Summary: This paper makes a set of arguments for the importance of ECD that are based around three key themes: a) that ECD is central to children's rights; b) that ECD is a sound economic investment; and c) that ECD provides solid foundations for children's holistic development. The paper refers to extensive evidence for the benefits of ECD, provides useful case studies, and explores some of the challenges the field continues to face. The full paper is relevant to girls' early childhood development, as one group that is regularly marginalised or excluded, and there is a short section specific to gender equity.

Save the Children. (2003). *What's the Difference? An ECD Impact Study From Nepal.* http://www.heart-resources.org/doc_lib/whats-difference-ecd-impact-study-nepal/

Summary: This paper reports on the impact of participation in ECD for children in Nepal. The paper reports that children who attended ECD showed consistent gains in starting school, maintaining attendance and engagement at school and success in examinations. The paper reports that this success is especially noticeable for girls and dalit children, and includes some descriptive statistics to make this point. The paper also reports the gains made in educating parents on the benefits of quality ECD and the parent's growing confidence in these benefits.

UNESCO (2007). *Strong Foundations for Gender Equality in Early Childhood Care and Education. Advocacy Brief.* UNESCO Bangkok. http://www.heart-resources.org/doc_lib/strong-foundations-gender-equality-early-childhood-care-education/

Summary: This advocacy brief explores the growing need for quality ECD provision across Asia. The scale of the need for ECD provision is illustrated by the fact that in 2005, China had 84 million children between 0-4 years old, while India had 120 million. The paper goes on to explore a range of issues regarding access and quality specifically in terms of girls and gender.

UNGEI (2010). *In Focus: Gender and Early Childhood Care and Development.* Newsletter Issue No. 6. http://www.heart-resources.org/doc_lib/focus-gender-early-childhood-care-development/

Summary: This newsletter presents brief summaries of several projects focusing on girls, gender sensitivity and ECD from across Asian and Pacific nations. These projects include investigations of culture and gender in ECD, school transitions, access to ECD, and literacy. The gender sensitivity focus emphasises the benefits of quality ECD programmes for girls. The newsletter also includes some useful resources, including an excellent advocacy video freely available via YouTube.

Questions for discussion

- What are the various kinds of intersectionality in girls' lives? How can/do these combine to produce a range of positive and/or negative ECD experiences and outcomes for girls?
- Consider the importance of adults, e.g. parents and teachers, on girls' ECD experiences. How can the importance of high quality ECD life experiences for girls become a valued part of all who work with children in their earliest years?
- What are some key barriers to accessing high quality ECD experiences for girls and how can they be overcome? For example, geographical location is a significant barrier to accessing educational settings for girls, how can this barrier be overcome?

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