

Early childhood development in the Global South: introduction

Simon Goldhill and Philip Lewis

Abstract: This supplementary issue relates to a sequence of activities the British Academy has supported since 2015 in relation to the bringing together of a range of disciplinary perspectives on early childhood development. The five articles developed out of a research programme, supported uniquely by both the Department for International Development and the Global Challenges Research Fund, illustrate this need for cross-disciplinary collaboration as well as engagement with policy, practice and local societies and norms. The early years often fall between different priorities and agendas and this supplementary issue brings forward some of the exciting research that is taking place to bridge these divisions and gaps whilst demonstrating the value and opportunities that integrated analysis and policy can achieve in the short term and in the long run for children, immediately and through to adult life.

Keywords: Early years, education, health, early childhood.

This supplementary issue comes out of a sequence of work the British Academy initiated in 2015 with the Department for International Development (DFID) on early childhood development. In October of that year, the Academy and DFID held a small roundtable of researchers, policymakers and practitioners with the aim of generating discussions on how research should feed into policy and practice, and how policy and practice in turn should influence future research agendas. In doing so, we hoped also to break down the barriers and silos between policy makers, practitioners and researchers working on early childhood development, and particularly to encourage cross- and interdisciplinary engagement and interaction between different research agendas. This was particularly important in a field which has often appeared to fall between various institutional stools—be they academic departments, government agencies or workers in the field.

The conversations from that roundtable and elsewhere, including a series of Lancet Commissions, have helped to generate the increasing interest and attention that early childhood development and education are beginning to develop in policy circles with important leadership from DFID. The British Academy has been able to support this through a research programme, uniquely co-funded by DFID and the Global Challenges Research Fund, that began in 2017, and of which this supplementary issue marks the culmination. As was the nature of that initial roundtable, this programme has had always a desire to act as an initial foundation and springboard for further action and activities well beyond anything the Academy might support. Bringing people and organisations together has been a fundamental lodestar to this activity, and especially vital in the field of early childhood development and education. An immediate outcome of this Programme has been to galvanise a broader set of funders, including the Economic and Social Research Council, the Medical Research Council, DFID and the Academy, to deliver a wider set of programmes in the years ahead. This supplementary issue, therefore, is a step on the journey of developing interactions and synergies across research, policy and practitioner communities, which is continuing. It does, however, provide an opportunity to reflect on the progress that has been made and the many areas where future work is still needed.

The British Academy's initial programme, begun in 2017, aimed to encourage and require interdisciplinary working between researchers in the humanities and social sciences, and the medical sciences. The programme therefore acknowledged the importance of bringing together expertise and knowledge from across the sciences, as well as the vital role the humanities and social sciences play in the global challenges that humanity faces today and for the future. The programme supported ten projects—all led by female academics, a first for the Academy—focused on the early years of children in nine low- and middle-income countries. Five of those projects are represented in this supplementary issue. The articles in this issue illustrate the range of

expertise, methods and practices that the programme wished to support and encourage. The articles also cover various aspects of a broad early childhood development and education arena; they bring forth many shared lessons and learning, as well as inter-related identifications of the barriers and opportunities that are faced in diverse contexts. This helps to develop a mutually informative understanding of the challenges and opportunities that are faced in different communities, while respecting how such a generalising perspective may lead to necessarily different local strategies, practices and priorities.

Each of the articles underlines the key importance of children's early years and the significant evidence that has been marshalled to illustrate the value of investing in the early years as a foundation for later childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Mwoma *et al.* (2020), for example, point to research showing that fully 66 per cent of children in sub-Saharan Africa have poor developmental outcomes—and the consequent urgency in finding ways to improve early childhood development interventions. A major challenge in developing effective and affordable early childhood programmes in low-income settings is achieving the transition from local interventions to a programme that can be delivered at regional or national scale. Strachan *et al.* (2020) investigate this issue in Uganda, where a multisectoral early childhood development programme has been approved at national level. Investigating how its implementation has progressed has provided key insights to this challenge of delivering a programme at scale. Mwoma *et al.* analyse the implementation and integration of the Care for Child Development package and Baby Friendly Community Initiative in rural Kenya. Their article demonstrates the positive results they have found, but they too note the challenges this intervention will face if it is to reach national scale because of the current lack of sufficient Master Trainers in Kenya to provide the regular supportive supervision that their research has found to be key to the programme's success.

Both articles insist that achieving national scale requires a shared political will—to focus on early childhood programmes nationally. The symmetrical challenges of translating political will into more local, community-level activities are a theme in both articles. Jha *et al.* (2020), however, identify the parallel but opposite concern—when political will for early childhood programmes is signally lacking or inadequate in its focus or impact. Their article focuses on the models and costs of supporting early childhood education in India. India has a long-standing integrated early childhood care and education programme, but due to a lack of political will and interest, this trend-setting programme has been systematically poorly funded. This illustrates a lack of engagement with the importance of the early years to future developmental outcomes. Jha *et al.* argue that a change of policy is required to enact the priority that is placed on the early years, and to maximise the success of the investment that programmes focused on those early years currently receive. Jha *et al.* demonstrate clearly

the complex and conflictual interconnections between different actors, institutions and incentives in developing early education policy and activities. As they note, policy without commensurate institutional support and appropriate resource, or vice versa, cannot effect significant difference. An integrated understanding across sectors and actors is required.

This integration is not only required at a policy level but also in the design and delivery of early years programmes. Mwoma *et al.* (2020), in turn, are exploring the effectiveness of efforts in Kenya to integrate programmes to produce such an integrated system. Strachan *et al.* (2020), for their part, show how the political will at a national level for an integrated multisectoral programme translates weakly at district and community level in Uganda. At these more local levels, early childhood development is equated with health and nutrition activities with less emphasis on child stimulation or the importance of cognitive development. This partial understanding of early childhood development locally in Uganda is mirrored, however, in much broader evidence gaps that are drawn out starkly in the article by Roelen *et al.* (2020). They analyse a series of graduation programmes across the Global South. Such programmes emphasise economic strengthening and poverty reduction; they do not directly approach the early years. But given that the early years are one of the most important stages of emotional, mental intellectual and social development, such programmes, Roelen *et al.* argue, should have an important role to play in fostering the development of children in their early years. This could also have an important impact on breaking, rather than reinforcing, the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Roelen *et al.*, however, find that there are some positive effects in relation to nutrition and health (the focus of attention Strachan *et al.* have seen in Uganda), whilst also noting there are regrettably large evidence gaps in relation to safety, security, responsive caregiving and early learning.

This lack of evidence provides the focus and inspiration for Wolf and Peele's summary article (2020), which is the first evaluation of early childhood education impacts on the trajectories of learning in sub-Saharan Africa (their focus is pre-schooling in Ghana). Both Wolf and Peele (2020) and Roelen *et al.* (2020) illustrate both the scale of positive impact that early years programming could have, and the importance of how such programmes are designed and implemented. Roelen *et al.* demonstrate how graduation programmes need a greater and more holistic focus on children to secure early childhood development outcomes and ultimately achieve the intended poverty reduction in the long run. Whilst children are not the focus of graduation programmes, the long-term success of such interventions depends on their ability to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, which begins and is often established from the early years. The pervasive impact of poverty on early development is also noted by Strachan *et al.* (2020) in their stark findings. Wolf and Peele's

article illustrates how the desire to achieve greater parent–teacher communication as part of an intervention can actually lead to disagreement and frustration amongst parents and teachers that were ultimately harmful to children. This indicates that parents' vision of schooling may be in contradiction to developmental learning processes at the heart of the teacher training being provided.

This misalignment of expectations underlines a further common strand of the articles in this supplementary issue: the importance of local context, local priorities and community practices and beliefs. Scale may be the goal but, as Strachan *et al.* (2020) note, it must be mindful of local priorities. Wolf and Peele (2020) note that more research is required to find effective ways to engage parents in their children's education, which is likely to be critical for improving teacher practice and children's development and breaking intergenerational poverty. Similarly, Mwoma *et al.* (2020) note the unintended effect of increased male involvement through the community health volunteers engaged in delivering the initiatives in rural Kenya. They do, however, note that social influences and cultural beliefs remain a barrier to fathers' complete engagement. While Strachan *et al.* argue that in future there needs to be greater understanding of what language can be used to describe stimulating play in such a way that parents will believe in the importance of its involvement and efficacy as a change agent for early childhood development. The importance, therefore, of peer influence and wider community engagement comes out strongly in this supplementary issue, with a clear need to focus on social norms around child interaction.

This is one part of a complex picture of programme design, implementation and scale, the political will to support and deliver an integrated early childhood development policy and policies linked to improving early years outcomes. This must be translated effectively at local levels. Interventions and changes in policy must be supported by further evidence, that is currently lacking in crucial areas. Broad national programmes are required, but these must be flexible enough to account for significant social norms and cultural beliefs in communities. Effective and durable outcomes require long-term programmes with the collection of evidence over a long trajectory of a cohort's educational development. In many ways, this reflects the challenge and opportunity of engaging in early childhood development which energised that original 2015 roundtable. The early years have often fallen between different priorities. Early education, especially in the impoverished areas which need such support most urgently, necessarily includes issues of health, as well as formal education, and must take into account social protection, nutrition, poverty reduction and many other policy portfolios and research perspectives. This supplementary issue brings forward some of the exciting research that is taking place to bridge these divisions and gaps whilst demonstrating the value and opportunities that integrated analysis and policy can achieve in the short term and in the long run for children, immediately and through to adult life.

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