

EQUIP-Tanzania PRACTICE PAPER

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Improving equitable access to quality pre-primary education in Tanzania: The School Readiness Programme

The importance of preparing children to learn

Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) programmes help ensure that young children fulfil their right to healthy development and education, and ultimately assist them in reaching their full potential. There is mounting evidence from around the world demonstrating that the first years of life are critical for child development as it is in these early years that children shape cognitive, social and language skills, as well as lifelong approaches to learning.¹

Furthermore, children's early learning and development is directly related to their future academic success. Research shows that children who begin school with weak prior knowledge and skills in relevant emergent literacy domains – most notably general verbal abilities, basic phonological awareness, familiarity with the basic purposes and mechanisms of reading, and letter knowledge – are particularly likely to have difficulty with learning to read in the primary grades.²

Evidence also shows that reducing the number of children who enter school with inadequate early learning experiences is an important step toward preventing school dropout and later learning difficulties and enabling long-term school success. It is in this context that, from 2015, EQUIP-Tanzania placed emphasis on improving children's readiness for school as a means to improve learning outcomes and help children take advantage of their right to education.

The Education Quality Improvement Programme (EQUIP-Tanzania) is a £90m, UKAID-funded education programme supporting the Government of Tanzania to improve the quality of learning outcomes in primary schools, particularly for girls. It focuses on system-led, cost-effective improvements that deliver change in ways that can be replicated at national scale. EQUIP-Tanzania began implementation in 2014 with five regions and has since expanded to reach the nine regions of Dodoma, Katavi, Kigoma, Lindi, Mara, Shinyanga, Simiyu, Singida, and Tabora, now covering over 5,196 primary schools and over three million pupils.³



Over 445,000 children

have been enrolled in more than 3,000 SRP centres since pilot in 2015



Classroom reading lesson

The School Readiness Programme

The School Readiness Programme (SRP) was developed by the Government of Tanzania and EQUIP-Tanzania through the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), with technical support from the Aga Khan Foundation, to provide quality pre-primary education to children marginalised by distance, geographical location in relation to schools and Kiswahili language skills. It is a 16-week programme that aims to improve the readiness of these children to start primary school and focuses on developing oral communication skills, confidence in the classroom and socioemotional competencies.

Launched in 2015, initially as a pilot, the SRP supported 1,050 School Readiness Centres across the seven EQUIP-Tanzania programme target regions of Dodoma, Lindi, Kigoma, Simiyu, Shinyanga, Mara and Tabora. These provided an adequate sample to test the model. The centres were established to pilot an approach as an interim measure to enable more children to develop school readiness skills while expansion of formal government pre-school education was ongoing, and to stimulate demand for pre-primary education. In total, 49,591 children enrolled in the School Readiness Centres during the pilot.

The SRP works to complement government efforts to increase access to pre-primary education for children marginalised by distance and language, in a cost-efficient manner, through a community-based approach which supports parents and community leaders to set up and establish School Readiness Centres within around two hours' walk from a primary school. The SRP works to stimulate demand and to prepare children for primary school while complementing national efforts to increase the provision of formal pre-schools over the long term.

The SRP has three distinctive features:

- A community-based approach supported by existing local government structures
- The use of active learning pedagogy to develop core early learning and development competencies using mainly stories, songs, poetry, drama and play
- Support to the development of effective, low cost learning aids at national and local levels.

The SRP enables parents and community leaders to identify local premises for School Readiness Centres. The centres are run by School Readiness Centre Facilitators (SRCFs), who are volunteers selected by the local communities, with oversight from the Ward Education Officers (WEOs) and the Head Teacher of the 'mother' primary school. EQUIP-Tanzania, in collaboration with TIE provides the SRCFs with training led by district facilitators who are trained by national trainers. The

SRCFs receive 10 days training in two phases using the adult learning model which combines theory and practical aspects of teaching and learning.

The need for the SRP in EQUIP-Tanzania target regions was especially pressing since the majority of children from these regions come from homes where Kiswahili is not the main language spoken, but where Kiswahili is the language of instruction in primary schools. The performance gap based on home language was noted in the EQUIP-Tanzania baseline assessment. The School Readiness Centres were developed to enable children to develop basic vocabulary in Kiswahili and related emergent literacy skills to better prepare them for primary school.

The School Readiness Centres initially provided a 12-week programme, from September to December, delivered by community volunteers who had an initial one week's training followed by a further week's training after four weeks of teaching at the centres. The content of the programme was developed collaboratively between EQUIP-Tanzania and TIE. Local Government Authorities (LGAs), with support from EQUIP-Tanzania, implemented the programme.

12 story book titles were provided to support children's development of five key competencies. The story book titles and a toolkit also serve as a means of School Readiness Centres making their own books and other learning materials. Each School Readiness Centre is linked to a 'mother' primary school, usually within around two hours' walk of the centre, which provides mentoring to the SRCF and overall technical oversight of the centre.



School Readiness Centres

Scaling-up the School Readiness Programme

Following the 2015 pilot, the story books and related teaching methods for promoting active learning to develop core competencies were incorporated into the national formal pre-school curriculum and materials with school-level implementation starting in 2017.

While some of the approaches from SRP were being mainstreamed into the national formal pre-school system, the EQUIP-Tanzania School Readiness Programme was then expanded to enable access in areas where there was no pre-school, with priority given to remote rural areas far from existing primary schools.

In 2016 the programme was scaled up to support over 2,700 School Readiness Centres, including continuing centres from 2015 as well as new centres, across the seven regions. The number of children enrolled increased to 160,888 (80,651 girls and 80,237 boys). The duration of the learning programme was increased from 12 to 16 weeks, although implementation schedules varied by location. Many of the School Readiness Centres started in 2015 continued running on the initiative of the volunteers and communities throughout. Nevertheless, the more structured learning programme ran from August 2016 for 16 weeks prior to formal primary school enrolment from January 2017. By 2018, there were over 3,000 centres. To date, 445,872 children have attended.

Innovative training methodology for volunteer facilitators

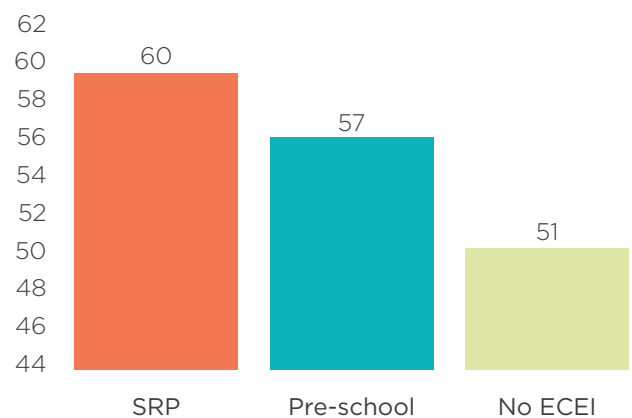
The volunteer School Readiness Centre Facilitators have proven themselves to be instrumental in helping to fill the gap of quality pre-primary provision in areas which had limited opportunities. SRCFs, who have proven themselves to be highly competent and committed, run the School Readiness Centres and are selected from within their communities. They are trained through a structured and highly participatory SRP training model which is strongly linked to the type of lessons and competencies taught in the centres. This innovative approach means SRCFs can deliver quality education for 16 weeks after only 11 days training, which is conducted over three sessions. The extra day is called a reflection day, implemented between the end of the SRP and the start of the school year and brings together the SR facilitators with their primary Standard 1 counterpart.

The teaching approach is based on a pupil-centred pedagogy, with a focus on songs and learning games, and the use of specially-developed weekly storybooks further support SRCF in making sessions interactive and stimulating. The nearest primary school also develops a partnership with the SRCFs to share experiences and encourage a smooth transition from the SRP to primary school.

Impacts and outcomes

An assessment was conducted in March 2017 to compare the early learning and development competencies of children starting Standard I in early 2017 who had attended School Readiness Centres in 2016 with children who had attended formal pre-school and those with no access to an Early Childhood Education Intervention (ECEI). The sample size was 1,191 children (606 girls and 585 boys) from 42 primary schools in 14 districts in seven regions.

The overall results given in the chart below show that children who had attended School Readiness Centres had substantially higher skill levels than those who had no access to an early childhood education intervention. They even had moderately higher skills than those who had attended formal a pre-school for at least one year.



 **substantially higher skill levels**

Children who had attended School Readiness Centres had substantially higher skill levels than those who had no access to an early childhood education intervention

The SRP has demonstrated consistent progress since the pilot in 2015. The results show a 37% increase in scores between the August 2016 baseline in two regions and the March 2017 results in the same two regions. Taking these results together with the comparison of results between children who attended the School Readiness Centre and those with no access to pre-school, they build a picture of a growing positive effect of School Readiness Centres. (IDELA study 2016-17).

The distance between the Lusungu School Readiness Centre and Sambala Primary School is 64km. Jovinask Japhet, Head Teacher of Sambala Primary School, has said:

“Before the establishment of SRP centre, there were a lot of children who did not have the access to attend school, many whom were registered over-aged. After the introduction of the new centre children are registered at their proper age which is 4-6 years old.”

Moreover, the Village Chairman pointed out on the benefits of the classroom construction saying:

“It has been a rescue to the provision of education services in the area. It will help many children to attend as before it was very far from the mother school.”

Targeting Inclusion

There was no significant difference between girls' and boys' scores in any of the study groups observed. Nevertheless, practices to promote gender equality were discussed during sessions in the SRP training and story books were designed to address gender inequality. One story book focused on the importance of a girl who was being kept at home to do household chores going to school instead. The story ends with her going to school. In addition, the training of the SRCF provided basic skills on identifying the probability of some forms of disabilities. The programme targeted remote rural areas where children did not have access to government pre-schools.

EQUIP-Tanzania and national facilitators trained SRCFs on the basic identification of children with physical disabilities, hearing, sight and speech impairments. The approach focused on early identification of children with disabilities and their referral to health practitioners. All regions have produced statistics on children who may be experiencing some barriers to their learning, particularly sight and hearing.

In 2018, 350 School Readiness Centres identified at least one child with a disability. This is lower than the milestone target of 1,000 centres. Although the programme developed materials to support in identification, it appears that in this instance the cascading of identification of children with disabilities did not work as well as planned. It is clear that the programme needs to provide more support to SRCFs as well as WEOs and trainers in this area. Together with providing information on identification, SRCFs were also trained to use a specifically designed poster and activities with parents and caregivers to raise awareness of the need for early stimulation at home.



121,379

of children enrolled in SRP in 2017

A low cost intervention

Given the need to extend access to pre-primary education with limited resources, the cost effectiveness of the SRP should be considered alongside the results achieved. The direct cost per child paid by EQUIP-Tanzania, usually via the LGA, is TZS 450 per child per day.

In terms of total rollout, the SRP costs were for four days a week for 16 weeks; a total of 64 days. Therefore, the total cost per child for the implementation in 2016 was TZS 28,800.

Apart from a shorter duration than formal pre-primary schooling, a number of features that enable the direct costs of the SRP to be kept low include:

- The SRCFs are unpaid volunteers unless community members decided to pay them a small allowance
- School Readiness Centres are existing religious or community buildings provided by communities without any rent having to be paid by the LGA or EQUIP-Tanzania
- Simple toolkits are provided to SRCF to make learning materials to reduce the number of books needed and training includes guidance and ideas for making teaching and learning aids from locally-available materials.

Most guidance to the SRCF is provided by the 'mother' primary school rather than any additional structure developed by EQUIP-Tanzania. Overall oversight is also provided by existing professional cadres within local government.



Classroom reading lesson



TZS450

cost per child per day

Building on learning from the School Readiness Programme

The SRP shows how access to quality school readiness education can be increased through a cost effective, community-based approach combined with appropriate training to volunteer facilitators and supported by existing local government structures. The Government of Tanzania is now scaling up support to School Readiness Centres nationally.

An emphasis on community involvement and the use of existing local government structures helps to reduce operational costs and dependence on external inputs while enhancing the ability of the SRP to scale rapidly and to reach even more children. Nonetheless, more decisive action is required to achieve the ambitious target set out in Tanzania's Education Sector Development Plan of universal participation in one year of pre-primary education.

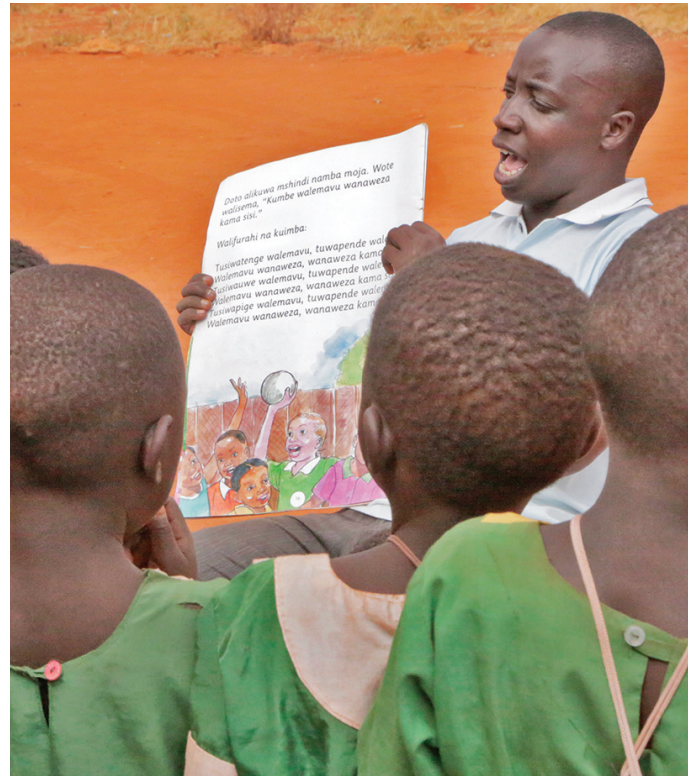
Community ownership enables expansion into other areas of low provision and parental education. Communities have demonstrated high demand and strong commitment to the SRP, often going far beyond ensuring their children's attendance and have contributed significantly to the running of the centres – from cooking to providing cash contributions to the SRCFs and even building classrooms, this illustrates the high demand for access to quality pre-primary education in rural and remote areas.

Anecdotal evidence shows that the SRP is starting to influence parental engagement with children in the home, but more can be done to support and encourage this stimulation in the family setting.

The positive results from the SRP are consistent with qualitative monitoring which shows that the volunteer SRCFs provide sound teaching based on active learning to build children's competencies while using effective low-cost materials. The training model ensures the quality across a variety of different contexts as evidenced from the IDELA survey.

While the School Readiness Programme continues to be scaled up it will be important to build on core features of the approach and to consider how these are also relevant to formal pre-schools. More specifically:

- Explore how to further develop community involvement, including promoting parents' learning at home with their children and using community-based facilities for learning
- Build on teaching approaches that promote active learning especially through play
- Adapt approaches to the development of low- cost teaching aids, which encourage activity- based learning especially when they are made with learners themselves
- Regular sharing of practice and learning between the pre-primary teacher and the Standard I teacher
- Explore how to find a path for recognising the SRCF role within the formal pre-school system.



Children learning in classroom

¹ Scarborough, 1998; Lonigan, Schatschneider & Westberg, 2008; Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000; Wagner, Torgesen, Rashotte, Hecht, Barker, Burgess, & Garon, 1997; Young Lives, 2010

² Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998

³ Engle et al, 2011

⁴ PO-RALG, BEMIS Report 2017