



INVESTING IN YOUNG CHILDREN: AN eLEARNING COURSE

A child's earliest years present a window of opportunity to improve outcomes later in life. A growing body of literature demonstrates that lack of investments in children in early years can have dramatic negative consequences for their future ability to learn and lead healthy and productive lives (Alderman, 2011; Naudeau et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2011; Denboba et al., 2014). The opposite also holds: Investing in young children can generate very high returns, particularly when compared to equivalent investments made at later stages in life (for example, see Engle et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, while there has been an uptake in the last decade for early childhood development (ECD) investments (at the World Bank, see Sayre et al., 2014), resources for ECD remain low in many countries. This is in part because policies and programs related to ECD are complex and managed by multiple ministries, including those in charge of education, health care, and social protection. In order to help practitioners and policymakers learn about ECD and the strategies that countries can implement to help children get a head start, the World Bank's Education Staff Development Program (ESDP) has produced an eLearning course on ECD (Wang et al., 2014). The course builds on face-to-face training workshops implemented over the last two years and consists of three interactive

The ECD eLearning course aims to help practitioners and policymakers learn about ECD and the strategies that countries can implement to ensure children get a head start.

web-based modules with 15 topics and a total learning time of approximately four to five hours. The three modules are devoted to three simple questions:

- (1) Why invest in ECD?
- (2) What matters for ECD?
- (3) How should ECD interventions be implemented?

At the end of each module, participants are invited to take a quiz with questions related to the materials covered in the module, and upon completion of the three quizzes with at least 80 percent of correct answers, participants receive a certificate of completion for the course.

Why Invest in ECD?

The first module in the course takes 45 minutes to complete. It summarizes scientific and economic arguments in favor of investments in ECD. From the scientific literature, four critical areas of development during a child's early years are identified: physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development. The course briefly reviews this evidence and concepts.

Neurological studies have shown that synapses develop rapidly during a child's first few years, forming the basis of cognitive and emotional functioning for the rest of a child's life. Adequate nutrition, especially from conception to age 2, and stimulation in a child's early years play a critical role in brain



development. Malnutrition in the early years leads not only to poor physical growth, but can impede brain development; malnutrition is also linked with delayed cognitive development and low academic achievement throughout a child's life.

From an economic point of view, while the specific rate of return on investments in ECD depends on a number of factors, including the focus of a program, duration of exposure, and quality, these rates of return have been shown to be as high as 17:1 (Heckman, 2008). Just as one example, increasing preschool enrollment to 50 percent in low- and middle-income countries could result in additional lifetime earnings ranging from \$15 billion-\$34 billion (Engle et al., 2011).

What Matters for ECD?

The second module in the course takes 75 minutes to complete and is devoted to a description of a policy diagnostic tool for ECD developed under the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) framework at the World Bank. Based on a review of the literature, SABER ECD identifies three policy goals that matter most for effective ECD systems: (1) Establishing an Enabling Environment; (2) Implementing Widely; and (3) Monitoring and Assuring Quality. Taken together, these goals form a coherent system that addresses the constraints to achieving effective ECD policies (such as fragmented policy, limited and uneven access to services, and poor quality assurance mechanisms). For each policy goal, a set of actions, or policy levers, are identified that decision-makers can act upon in order to strengthen ECD.

Figure 1 presents the structure of the SABER-ECD analytical framework comprising the three core ECD policy goals and

nine associated policy levers that support the achievement of these goals. The eLearning course provides a detailed description of the framework together with stylized examples of two countries and how each fares along the various levers and goals.

How should ECD interventions be implemented?

The last module takes 120 minutes to complete and is devoted to the implementation of ECD programs and policies. Six topics are included in this module. The first topic provides a summary of findings from a 11-year review of the World Bank's experience with ECD projects. The review documents trends in ECD operations (lending and grants), as well as analytical work, and examples of projects implemented in countries such as Mexico, Eritrea, and Indonesia.

The second topic considers inter-sectoral coordination. It discusses what a comprehensive ECD system looks like and how coordination helps in achieving synergies between interventions, as well as cost savings through the combination of interventions in service delivery. Examples of coordination mechanisms from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean are provided.

The third topic is devoted to ECD diagnostics, whether for countries or projects. The topic discusses the inputs that are needed for ECD interventions, and how such interventions can be funded. It reviews some of the broad indicators (for example, those related to the Millennium Development Goals) that can be used to monitor ECD outcomes at the country level, as well as some of the more detailed child

Box 1: How to Access the ECD eLearning Course

The title of the ECD eLearning course is "Early Childhood Development for Policymakers and Practitioners." The course is available free of charge on the website of the World Bank's e-Institute. It is self-paced. To access the course, please go to:

<http://einstitute.worldbank.org/ei/course/education-staff-development-program-early-childhood-development-policy-makers-and-practitioner>

assessment tools that can be used for more detailed evaluations.

These assessment tools are then described in more detail in the fourth topic in order to help practitioners choose the right type of child assessment for the outcome they are trying to achieve or influence. The issue of how to adapt such assessment tools to local conditions is also discussed. Finally, the topic briefly describes ongoing impact evaluations being implemented in 10 countries in Africa, Latin America, East Asia, and South Asia.

The fifth topic examines the cost of ECD interventions and their financing in more detail. It explains how to estimate the overall cost of specific interventions, as well as the cost per beneficiary. While some costs may be borne by families, many of the costs should be paid for by governments and/or other funders, especially when programs target low-income beneficiaries. This topic provides guidelines on how much countries should invest in ECD programs and documents examples from Columbia, Denmark, and Indonesia of combinations of funding sources, allocation mechanisms, and coverage rates for different types of ECD interventions.

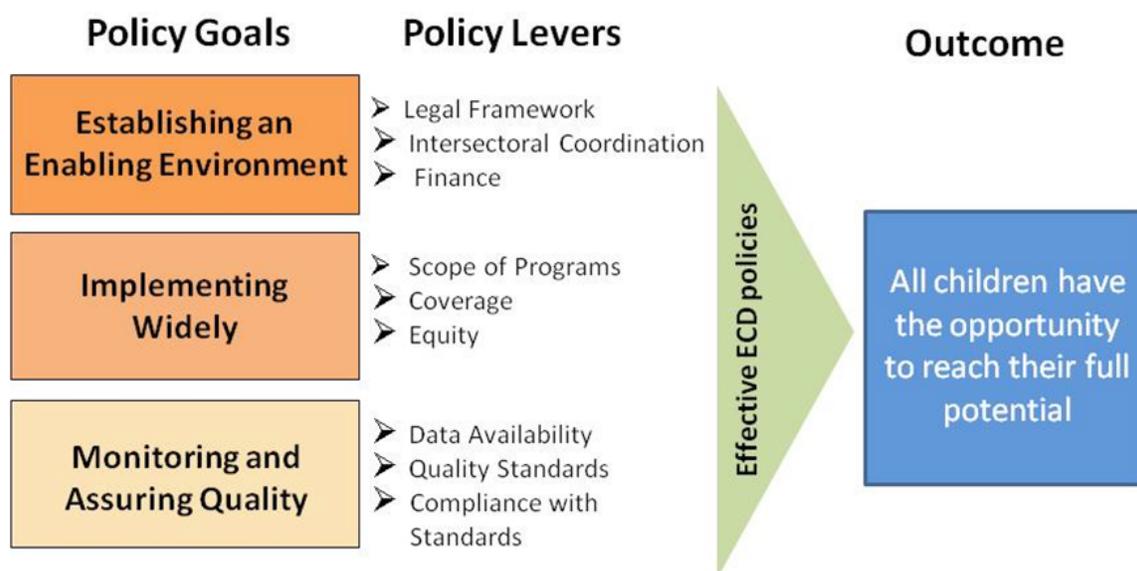
The last topic considers issues related to project design,

implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. The discussion is based in part on a case study for a large project implemented in Indonesia. After providing a snapshot of the project, the concepts of results chain and results framework are introduced to link inputs with outputs and intermediate as well as final outcomes.

Target Audience

This course was designed for World Bank task team leaders in education, health, and social protection who are involved in the design and implementation of ECD projects or are involved in policy dialogue on ECD with governments and other organizations. While these staffs have broad-based program and project-related responsibilities, they may not be familiar with some aspects of ECD interventions and policies. The introductory eLearning course provides them with a resource to broaden their knowledge. But it is also hoped that the course, which is available free of charge, should be of interest to policymakers in countries and staff from donors and other agencies, including non-governmental organizations, as well as graduate students.

Figure 1: SABER-ECD Policy Goals and Levers



Source: Neuman and Devercelli (2013).



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