

**Knowledge Network  
Dutch Consortium for Rehabilitation  
Research Brief #9**

*Early Childhood Development in  
Bong and Montserrado, Liberia  
-Part I*

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This brief is part of a series of research briefs of the DCR consortium. The purpose is to communicate lessons and corresponding recommendations for programme quality improvement. For information on the research methodology please refer to the full report, available upon request.

This research looks at the *key risk factors and success factors for sustainability of Save the Children’s Early Childhood Education (ECD) programme in Liberia and the way these can be mitigated/migrated*. To answer the research question, participatory qualitative and quantitative methods were used for both adult and child participants of the ECD program of Save the Children.

The ECD program of Save the Children aims to provide education for children from 3-5 years old with the goal to prepare early learners for formal schooling through play. The research was conducted by two researchers and divided into two parts. Part I [As discussed in this research brief] will address the impact of ECD on beneficiaries of Save the Children’s program. Part II focuses on the capacity of the Government of Liberia to support the ECD program. The research was conducted from November 2013 until April 2014 in early childhood centers in Montserrado and Bong Counties.

Save the Children’s ECD program has an overall positive and supporting effect on the existing early childhood education system. Community members report that they are satisfied with the learning outcomes which the children demonstrate. Community satisfaction is evident by community voluntary work in the ECD centers and the provision of local material for the building of school structures.

Several risk factors have been identified for sustainability of ECD in Liberia. Lack of skilled and trained ECD caregivers influences the quality of teachers and hence the learning outcomes of ECD students. Currently the ECD curriculum is awaiting approval of the Ministry of Education. The lack of a standardized and official curriculum causes the design of the ECD program to differ from existing Kindergarten/ABC educational programs. Children in ECD centers are educated differently than their peers and caregivers focus on different learning outcomes than teachers in the conventional model. Also, due to the lack of a standardized curriculum, ECD classes are often not adapted to first grade entry requirements and for many students a smooth transition from pre-primary to primary education is impeded.

Community ownership varies in the different communities that are supported by Save the Children due to the support of local leadership structures and location specific characteristics. The lessons below show the main risks and success factors that

**Recommendations**

- Train teachers regularly to ensure high quality of teaching. High quality of teaching will ensure maximum impact on the development of ECD students.

influence the sustainability of ECD in Liberia, as identified by this research study. Recommendations are made to mitigate these identified risk factors

***Lesson 1: Underqualified teachers impede development of ECD students; quality of teaching needs to be improved by increasing ECD teacher and caregiver training***

Findings of the research study show that ECD caregivers often have not completed any form of teacher training other than training organized by Save the Children. Due to the lack of repetitive and in-depth training, the quality of teaching is low and this is reflected on the overall development and learning outcomes of ECD students. Centralized ECD teacher trainings organized by the Government of Liberia are currently very limited due to lack of funding. Save the Children, at the same time, does not have the financial capacity to implement on-going in-depth teacher training needed to ensure desired quality. Save the Children needs to lobby at the Ministry of Education/Bureau of Early Childhood for centralized certified training for early childhood development caregivers.

***Lesson 2: Avoiding the prioritization of a certain category of beneficiaries contributes to community support and ownership of ECD intervention***

The current ECD structure implemented by Save the Children in Montserrado is aimed at improving the livelihoods of both teenage mothers and pre-primary school children. Teenage mothers do not have to pay for the education of their children and enjoy a privileged position compared to other mothers. The research study shows that this privilege for teenage mothers over community mothers contributes to tension that affects community support of the intervention. ECD communities in Bong do not assign a privileged position to teenage mothers and demonstrate higher community ownership and project support. Community contribution and collaboration prove to be higher in communities with a single project goal; confirming the idea that program design needs to be in line with local relational structures and hierarchy.

***Lesson 3: Better understanding of ECD program design contributes to community ownership and support of early education***

Due to the unconventional nature of ECD program design, parents and other community members often express difficulty in understanding ECD education. The Liberian education system is known for its rote-learning style and the importance of play is new for many parents and other community members. Parents and teachers do not properly understand the importance of play and non-cognitive social development for the cohesive growth of early learners. Lack of understanding of ECD methods and effects causes parents and other community members to believe that the children are not being educated properly. Traditionally pre-primary schools teach students to read and write and this teaching method is

***Recommendations:***

- When implementing ECD programs on the local level, assess existing role divisions and local hierarchy structures. Improve community support in communities in Montserrado by awareness raising activities to change marginalized position of teenage mothers.
- Create participative and creative communication strategies that fit local reality [e.g. movies, plays]. Utilize these strategies to create awareness on benefits of ECD for children, parents and communities as a whole.
- Involve local leadership structures in ECD design: include local leaders in the program design and mobilization phase and during implementation. Revise the role of local leaders in existing ECD structures
- Aim at the improvement of the livelihoods of children **or** teenage mothers to make ECD beneficial: if both parties need to be involved select beneficiaries together with local communities to prevent community disagreement with prioritized position and lack of support

ingrained in parent’s perceptions of how teachers should teach their children.

All community members expressed a lack of understanding of the goals and methods of the ECD program. According to the majority of community members and parents (in the focus group discussions), existing communication strategies of Save the Children are not effectively informing them about the complex learning and overall benefits of ECD for the development of a child. Many community members in Liberia have never received education themselves and being uneducated, they often express difficulties understanding the focus of ECD on play and non-cognitive development. Community members also expressed that they are not used to participate in group-style meetings as organized by Save the Children. Participative and creative communication methods that suit the level of education of community members need to be developed to inform and stimulate support of ECD structures.

**Lesson 4: Current ECD program design is not harmonized with traditional (pre-) primary education system**

Early Childhood Development is using a specific learning method that focuses on the importance of play for the development and learning outcomes of early learners. Traditional pre-primary education is often focused on teaching 3-5 year old children to read and write. Students in first grade of primary school are, as a result, expected to read and write. ECD curriculum has not yet been approved by the Ministry of Education and pre-primary and primary curricula have not yet been harmonized. On a local level, this creates many problems: children are not promoted to first grade, kept in ECD or kept in first grade because of first grade reading and writing criteria and ECD focus on learning by playing.

**Lesson 5: Local leadership structures have impact on the quality and sustainability of ECD**

The involvement of existing local leadership structures in the ECD program design is needed to ensure continuity and support of the community. In the current ECD program the majority of community members are not benefiting directly. When local communities are self-reliant and strong community cohesion exists a community-based program design as ECD will be sustained and supported. However, as seen in Montserrado, when communities do not depend on each other for survival, the ECD program is less successful. Local leadership is key for the sustainability and quality of the ECD program. When local leaders like town chief and principal motivate community members, support of the centre will flourish.

- Save the Children should lobby for the harmonization of first-grade and ECD curricula with the Ministry of Education. First grade teachers should be included in ECD trainings.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Create a more prominent role for local leaders the design of the program. Research local relationships and hierarchies prior to implementation and design a community based and specific ECD program together with the local population to obtain a sustainable and qualitative high ECD program.

### *Implication of research findings for DCR program implementation*

*By Emmanuel Goko, Education Project Manager DCR – Save the Children*

The issue of underqualified teachers and the lack of centralized ECD teacher training programs, has challenged the optimization of learning and development outcomes for children of ages 3 – 5 years in Save the Children support centers in Bong and Montserrado. Recognizing this shortfall, Save the Children designed a fundraising strategy that tends to strengthen collaboration with the Bureau of Early Childhood Development of the Ministry of Education (MoE), with the aim of developing/ integrating a certificate level ECD program at the three Teacher Training Institutions across the country. Based on the findings and recommendation offered by this research, Save the Children can take the next step adapting creative and context relevant communication and participatory approaches in order to increase awareness, ownership and sustainability.

Save the Children uses a 'Theory of Change' approach in programming and pushes to build partnerships as the basis for scaling up. Learning and local community involvement are now integral parts of Save the Children's community based ECD approach, which is being piloted in Montserrado. In the community based ECD approach, an agreement is made between community leaders, the MoE, and Save the Children, which clarifies the roles and responsibilities of all actors. Additionally, an ECD management committee - comprising of town chiefs, women and youth groups and schools, and ECD administrators - coordinates the roles at local level, which are largely focused on mobilizing and managing local inputs to ECD implementation. It is expected that lessons captured from the community based ECD pilot will be factored into our strategic ECD thinking, design and henceforth, replicated in other communities as a way to enhance sustainability.

At the inter-sectoral early childhood development coordination level, Save the Children is engaged in the finalization and dissemination of the ECD curriculum. Save the Children scoped and sequenced the ECD lessons in reference to the newly developed ECD curriculum and planned to start the testing of the new curriculum in nine ECD centers in four counties of Liberia. As part of the 2015 strategy, we will endeavor to further engage the Bureau of Curriculum, Testing and Evaluation for the harmonization of the early childhood development and primary school curriculum. As part of Save the Children's advocacy strategy, we will lobby with the MoE and other actors for the integration of ECD teacher training.