

# Early Childhood Education



The early years of a child’s life set the stage for healthy development and positive long-term outcomes. Yet an estimated 250 million children worldwide do not get a healthy start because of poor nutrition, a lack of early stimulation, and risk factors associated with poverty. Investing in early childhood education (ECE) maximizes opportunities for young children around the world to achieve their developmental potential, with far-reaching positive implications for current and future generations.

Our expertise in the early learning aspects of early childhood development (ECD) informs interventions that help children build a solid cognitive foundation to support success in early primary education.

- **Pre-primary and early primary education.** We work with ministries of education around the world to develop teaching and learning materials and train teachers of young children. We promote developmentally appropriate practices while respecting local definitions of quality, and build capacity of policy makers and educators to effectively advocate for increased investment in pre-primary education. RTI has vast experience in early grade reading and math assessment and in improving instructional practice in early primary grades.
- **Executive function (EF).** We conduct research to better understand individual differences in executive function, including how developmental changes in EF during early childhood contribute to children’s school readiness and risk for disruptive behavior disorders. We invest in rigorous, practical measures of EF that can be applied in rural, low-income settings outside the U.S.

- **Child development assessment.** We develop innovative assessment tools that tell us about children’s development and early learning from birth through age eight, and beyond. We conduct rigorous, policy-relevant studies of early care and education programs, and of the cognitive abilities of young children—both inside and outside of formal education settings—across the transition from preschool to kindergarten. Our measurement tools help education leaders and policymakers evaluate programs, acquire and employ data for decision making, and improve education for the youngest learners and most vulnerable populations.

## Project and Research Highlights

**CAMBODIA. All Children Reading (ACR),** U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) (2017–2019). All Children Reading-Cambodia is a reading implementation project funded through the ACR-Asia mechanism, with the goal of improving the early grade reading skills of children from kindergarten to grade 3. This will include creating supplemental materials for kindergarten classrooms, such as storybooks, for use with children with and without disabilities.



### Why Invest in Early Childhood Education?

Recent estimates show that 43 percent of children in developing countries under the age of five are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential. Investing in ECE can lead to significant social and economic gains. Unsurprisingly, interventions that lead to positive outcomes in the first 2,000 days of a child's life have very high returns on investment for society. According to Nobel laureate economist James Heckman, early interventions such as providing proper nutrition for infants to support brain development have an exponentially higher return on investment than later interventions such as job training programs for adults.

Education is a crucial part of the whole early child development (ECD) spectrum of services. In 2015, for the first time, the SDGs made ECD a central theme. Millions of young children in developing countries are not meeting SDG targets related to ECD, including developmental milestones and participating in organized learning before primary school. In addition to these education-related goals for ECD, nutrition, child survival, and child protection goals have also been established, illustrating the multi-sectoral nature of ECD.

**GLOBAL.** *Global Report on Early Grade Repetition and Pre-primary Enrollment*, World Bank (2017). RTI collaborated with the World Bank on a global report about the problem of hidden repetition, or repetition that is not formally reported to the government, in the early primary years. The report also looked at the correlation between this repetition—sometimes exceeding 50%—and lack of access to pre-primary education. It included a theoretical framework, supporting data from an RTI-funded study in Uganda, and several case studies of countries that have successfully addressed this problem through expansion of access to pre-primary education.

**JORDAN.** *USAID Early Grade Reading and Math Project*, USAID (2015–2019). As a component of a program to improve the math and reading skills of pupils in grades 1-3, RTI is working with the Ministry of Education to provide an accelerated school readiness program for children who have not had access to kindergarten, in the summer before they begin grade 1. This program educates both the children and their parents to help children transition successfully to school and helps parents engage in learning activities at home. RTI is also partnering with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development to map and analyze the existing provision of kindergarten



in the country and determine gaps in coverage, especially among marginalized and refugee populations. This analysis will lead to policy recommendations for achieving universal kindergarten enrollment, including options to leverage the private sector through public-private collaboration.

**KENYA. The Tayari Programme – Getting Children Ready for School**, Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (2014–2019).

The goal of the Tayari program is to increase school readiness of pre-primary children in Kenya, including sufficient cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being. As of 2018, Tayari has reached 145,000 children in 1,500 early childhood centers in selected counties in Kenya. Tayari’s activities include development of learning materials for pupils and teachers, teacher training and instructional support, and integrated technology solutions for tracking child development outcomes. Additionally, one component aims to reduce illness-related school absenteeism by promoting improved hygiene practices, water treatment, and health record-keeping in schools.

**LIBERIA. READ Liberia Project**, USAID (2017–2022). This five-year primary education program is helping improve early grade reading skills for Liberian students in grades 1 and 2 and to pilot test emergent literacy skills for Liberian

students in public kindergarten schools in six targeted counties. The kindergarten pilot will reach a total of 2,700 kindergarten students from 60 schools, with the goal of improving kindergarten oral vocabulary for emergent literacy.

**TANZANIA. Tusome Pamoja**, USAID (2016–2021). The USAID Tusome Pamoja Program, or “Let’s Read Together,” provides sector support to the national pre-primary and primary education program through intensive, targeted assistance in Zanzibar and four mainland regions. Tusome Pamoja aims to improve emergent academic skills for roughly 1.4 million children through improved instructional practice, system strengthening, and community engagement. The program also supports pre-primary to grade 4 learning material development and adaptation.

**TANZANIA. Early Learning Partnership (ELP) System Research**, World Bank (2017–2018). RTI is performing a situational analysis of pre-primary education, with a goal of informing policy making and contributing to the wider body of research on education systems. This analysis has five main components: teacher diagnostic, financing, parenting practices, non-state provision of pre-primary education, and political-economic analysis.



**TANZANIA. Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes (MELQO)**, United Nations Children’s Fund (2016–2017). RTI implemented MELQO, an assessment measuring school readiness and classroom quality, in mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar with a nationally representative sample to provide a much-needed snapshot of pre-primary learning outcomes and quality. This assessment has enabled the government to better understand the quality of the pre-primary classroom and school environment, and children’s school readiness skills at the start of grade 1. The government will be able to use the findings to inform pre-primary sector planning, and as a baseline measure for future growth in early learning and quality of school environments.

**UGANDA. Repetition/Early Years National Study**, U.K. Department for International Development (DFID) (2017–2018). In 2016, RTI designed and self-funded a pilot study in two districts in Uganda to investigate whether access to pre-primary education affects enrollment and repetition. Parents and teachers were interviewed about children’s pre-primary attendance, grade repetition, and access to pre-primary education programs. Results of this study confirmed that over-enrollment is related to repetition. Based on these results, Ugandan policymakers expressed their interest in conducting a national-scale research study to help them address the intersecting nature of

these challenges in the first five years of life. As a result of this pilot and interest from policymakers, DFID funded a national study to examine the issue of repetition at a larger scale. Data were collected from teacher and parent interviews and student records in 10 sub-regions throughout Uganda. This national study also found that over-enrollment is partially due to repetition, and that this repetition is partially due to a lack of free quality pre-primary education.

**WEST BANK AND GAZA. Early Grade Reading Project**, USAID (2017–2022). This project provides sector support to improve students’ reading and writing outcomes in Ministry of Education-supported schools in kindergarten through grade 2. The kindergarten component will include a review of the new kindergarten curriculum, support for training roll-out, and implementation of the new curriculum, as well as the development of assessment and monitoring tools to track the implementation.

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#### More Information

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