Impact of Free Primary Education on Early Childhood Development in Kenya

Introduction
Free Primary Education (FPE), introduced in Kenya in 2003, has enabled 1.3 million poor children to benefit from primary education for the first time through the abolishment of fees and levies for tuition. The gross enrolment rate in primary education jumped from 86.8% in 2002 to 101.5% in 2004.

Though intended to boost primary education, FPE has had consequences in other areas of education, including early childhood development (ECD). The purpose of the present brief is to discuss the impact of FPE on ECD in Kenya and to outline two major policy options that may mitigate possible negative impact.

What is happening to ECD?
Studies have been conducted to assess the effects of FPE on ECD Centres. Some report on negative effects, while others note no major drawbacks. While the overall impact of the policy is yet to be determined, the UNESCO/OECD Early Childhood Policy Review Mission, which took place in September 2004, observed that the policy did have a negative impact on ECD Centres serving poor children.

In North Eastern Province, one of the most disadvantaged regions, for example, there has been a sharp decrease in ECD enrolments since the implementation of FPE. Declining enrolments appear to be so acute and widespread that there is a serious concern about the “collapse” of ECD services. In the better-off regions, such as Rift Valley Province and Nairobi City, decreasing enrolments are observed in public- and community-owned ECD Centres, which typically serve poorer children, but not in private ECD Centres, which accommodate the more affluent ones.

The main reason for this phenomenon is that since the implementation of FPE, poor parents are choosing to withdraw their children from ECD Centres and/or keep them at home until they reach the age of primary school entry. They refuse to pay the fees for ECD on the grounds that ECD, like primary education, should be free.

Decreased enrolments have meant reduced salaries for ECD teachers. In Kenya, ECD teachers’ salaries are in most cases covered by parental fees, unlike their counterparts in primary schools who are paid by the government according to an official teacher salary scale. In ECD Centres, parental fees are paid in proportion to the number of children one enrolls and are mostly, if not entirely, used to cover teachers’ salaries. Thus, the level of teachers’ remuneration depends on the total number of children enrolled as well as parents’ ability to pay fees. As a result, the reduced number of ECD enrolments brought about by FPE has been a blow to teachers, whose remuneration was meagre and unstable already before the introduction of FPE. With parents increasingly reluctant to pay for ECD, FPE has made it even more difficult to mobilise resources from parents for ECD. Cases of increased job insecurity and ECD Centre closures are on the rise, particularly in poor communities.

FPE has also had unintended consequences for ECD in terms of resource allocation. ECD classrooms set up on the premises of public primary schools have been shut down in order to accommodate the surge of enrolment in primary education sparked by FPE. In some cases, ECD children and teachers must put up with reduced space; in others, they have been moved to the worst classrooms on the premises. At the district level, inspection and supervision of ECD Centres, some of which is carried out by the district-based zonal inspectors of schools, have reportedly become less frequent. Instructed by the government to closely monitor the progress of FPE, the zonal inspectors are spending more time visiting primary schools, leaving little room for work with ECD Centres.

Policy Options
To handle the main problems caused by FPE, two broad policy options can be considered. One is to provide a free year of pre-primary education to all five-year-olds – the year preceding entry into primary school – taught by

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1 Under FPE, parents must still cover other various costs of schooling, e.g. uniforms, meals, examination fees for Standard 8, the last grade of primary education (Free Primary Education: EVERY Child in School, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST), 2003).
3 ECD is the generic term used in Kenya to refer to the early childhood care and education for children ages 0-5 years.
4 This article is based on the findings of the policy review conducted in Kenya,as part of the UNESCO/OECD Early Childhood Policy Review Project. For details, see Policy Review Report: Early Childhood Care and Education in Kenya, Early Childhood and Family Policy Series No. 11 – 2005. UNESCO. Contact UNESCO for a copy.
5 The Effects of Free Primary Education on the ECD Programme in Kenya, Kenya Institute of Education, 2004; Challenges of Implementing FPE in Kenya, 2005, UNESCO.
6 The gross enrolment rate for the age group 3’-5’ was 44.4% in 2001. Reference: EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2005, UNESCO Publishing.
7 The monthly salaries of ECD teachers were found to be generally below the basic minimum wage rates recommended by the Ministry of Labour and Manpower Development (John T. Mukui and Jotham A. Mwaniki, December 1995, Report of the Sample Survey of ECD Centres).
8 Most ECD Centres set up on the premises of primary schools are in rural areas (Mukui and Mwaniki, December 1995).
government-sponsored teachers (the PPE Option, hereafter). The other is to allow ECD Centres to continue to ensure children’s continuous and holistic development by offering minimum government subsidies and mobilising parents and communities to make up the difference to pay teachers’ salaries. Proponents of this option argue first of all that it would primarily benefit poor communities. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it would not cause a systemic split between ECD for five-year-olds and that for younger children, but help maintain ECD Centres as providers of children’s continuous and holistic development. In fact, ensuring holistic development – rather than early primary education – is the best way to prepare young children for successful schooling. Children perform best in school when they have had opportunities to develop socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively in their early years. Supporters of the ECD Option would also argue that specific learning skills, such as reading, writing and counting, can be best acquired later in school when children reach the age, developmentally, to tackle abstract tasks. Pre-school children do not learn in the abstract but through concrete experiences.

The ECD Option does raise concerns over financial feasibility, even though the funds required would be less than for the PPE Option. Another drawback of the ECD Option is that it would be administratively complex to identify ECD teachers entitled to the proposed government subsidies and to channel them properly. Also, the issue of whether ECD teachers entitled to these government subsidies should be absorbed into the teaching force would need to be resolved. Still another factor to consider is that the ECD Option would be much less appealing than the PPE Option to parents, many of whom consider the main purpose of ECD Centres to be drilling children with the alphabet and numbers, and who would be totally content with the provision of a free year of ECD services.

Conclusion

The decision on which option to pursue is for the Government to take, and should be based on the specific needs of the country. There should not be a right or a wrong choice. In a similar situation, however, countries tend to favour the PPE Option or its variation as a strategy to improve children’s school readiness and also to increase government resources.

Such decision should not be criticised; and it could be a strategic choice, in fact, if efforts are made to ensure that the pedagogy is designed and practiced to promote the children’s holistic development. The choice should also be acceptable if the government sets a phased plan for the younger age group, indicating benchmarks to attain for each of the remaining ECD age groups. Phasing and prioritising are often the only policy choice available when an ideal meets a reality constraint. As such, they should be accepted as good strategies so long as they ensure the holistic development of the children prioritised.

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