



Enablers and Barriers for Scaling an Early Childhood Care and Education Model: The Inclusive Home-Based Early Learning Project in Marginalised Communities in Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Kenya.

Samson Mhizha¹, Joice Tafirenyika¹, Miria Nandera², Godfrey Ejuu², Rose Opiyo Atieno³, & Edward Otim⁴

¹University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe;

²Kyambogo University, Kampala, Uganda;

³Masinde Muliro University, Kakamega, Kenya;

⁴Sense International, Kampala, Uganda.

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood development (ECD) services are increasingly recognised as essential in improving children's developmental needs and mitigating the effects of intergenerational poverty in Africa. Research and practice have shown that ECD services improve children's health and nutritional status, performance, and retention in school. Though the benefits of preschool exposure are well understood, only 30% of the preschool age children in Sub-Saharan Africa are enrolled in preschool. The enablers for scaling the initiative include presence of government support, cultural rootedness of the initiative, community leadership and support and the presence of Hub models. The barriers included lack of funding support from government, negative attitudes on children with disabilities and lack of understanding of the significance of early child education. These barriers affect the opportunities for scaling this initiative for inclusive early learning among children in marginalised communities. Recommendation from this include establishing more and stronger collaborations with different stakeholders including government officials, civil society groups and professional associations, providing more capacity building for parents to ensure community ownership of the IHELP centres by ensuring that parents get more skills and involvement in the learning of their children and making children with disabilities and their families central in the centres to deal with negative community perceptions on children with disabilities.

Introduction

Evidence shows that quality Early Child Development (ECD) services have tremendous impact on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, school readiness, growth, and future economic potential (Jeyam et al., 2022; Spiers et al., 2018), and even brain development (Akkari, 2022). Nonetheless, only 30% of children in sub-Saharan Africa participate in any organized ECD services (Akkari, 2022). Spiers et al. (2023) observed that often when ECD services are offered, they are delivered like education for older children, with children spending the school day sitting still and receiving rote instruction, yet these children learn best through play and hands-on experiences, with guidance from a caring adult. Overall, ECD services have been poorly implemented in Africa (Spiers et al., 2018). Children from marginalised rural areas, those from poor households or communities and those who have disabilities in Africa are at the highest risk of sub-optimal growth and development (Jeyam et al., 2022). Children with disabilities in most African countries (including Zimbabwe) are often excluded and marginalized from educational services (Dube et al., 2021). Given the well-documented academic, socio-emotional, physical, and economic long-term benefits of early childhood development, there is

a critical need to scale up quality and innovative ECD services in developing countries, especially in Africa (Jeyam et al., 2022)

The Problem

In many African countries, children with disabilities are often excluded from ECD services as many parents lack the support services to help these children (Clark et al., 2024). There is an urgent need to scale up early childhood development services in African countries, particularly for children with disabilities especially the Inclusive Home-based Early Learning Project (IHELP). Recent estimates suggest that as many as 250 million children in developing countries are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential, with two-thirds of those at-risk children living in sub-Saharan Africa (Jeyam et al., 2022). The at-risk children include those from rural areas, those from poor households or displaced communities and those who have disabilities (Akkari, 2022; Grimes et al., 2023). The African Child Policy Forum (ACPF, 2011) revealed that only less than 10% of children with disabilities in Africa receive education with the majority of these staying in urban areas even though 90 per cent of children with disabilities living in rural areas. Access to ECD services for children with disabilities are even scarcer (ACPF, 2011). The African continent

has the least developed ECD services globally (Akkari, 2022). The ACPF (2011) further wrote that in most countries at least one person out of 10 lives with physical, sensory, or mental disability.

A key challenge is that ECD research and projects which generate exciting evidence on impact at small scale do not always 'scale well' (Cavallera et al., 2019). Olsen (2023) observed that only a few innovations ever successfully scale throughout education systems. It is therefore critical to discuss the factors that promote and those that hinder scaling of ECD interventions, particularly in the context of the scaling the IHELP model. Many ECD studies in Africa have frequently shown great promise, but very few have been successfully scaled to the regional or national levels (Jeyam et al., 2022). Scaling is a range of approaches from deliberate replication to organic diffusion to integration into national systems that expand and deepen impact leading to lasting improvements in people's lives (Wyss et al., 2023). For Olsen (2023), this perspective on scaling implies a systems approach where the focus is not on only expanding an individual project but on enacting and managing a sustainable change in the broader system.

However, less is known about the specific ECD interventions that work for children in particularly vulnerable circumstances, including those with disabilities or living in extreme poverty. This is partly because these children are rarely present in mainstream ECD settings; even when they are, their difficulties may not be recognised (Grimes et al., 2023). The Inclusive Home-based Early Learning Project (IHELP), itself a programmatic to response parental apathy, and children's lack of access to ECD services, is an action research model that was developed by Kyambogo University in collaboration with Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology in Kenya, University of Zimbabwe in Zimbabwe and Sense International in Uganda. The model was developed as a hybrid of home-based and centre-based nursery school models, which helps to maximise the strengths of both models. The IHELP model established 32 centres with 16 in Uganda, 8 in Kenya and 8 in Zimbabwe. IHELP also collaborates with health and educational services centres to provide deworming, vitamin A supplements and disability screening. Using the Ubuntu spirit, the centre is managed by a group of volunteer parents who form the management committee.

Literature across the globe does support home-based family engagement in providing ECD services. Indeed, home-based family engagement stimulating ECD services is linked with higher numeracy, literacy, social-emotional functioning, and motor skills development (Rey-Guerra et al., 2022). Empirical and theoretical literature shows that parental or caregiver's engagement in ECD services predicts higher cognitive, language, social-emotional, and executive functions development with positive long-lasting effects in future academic achievement (Rey-Guerra et al., 2022). While the exact form and goals of these interactions are likely to differ substantially across cultures, the role of parents or primary caregivers as nurturers and protectors is universally recognized (Rey-Guerra et al., 2022). The IHELP model is based on the premise that parents are the first and best teachers of their children at ECD level when the

parents are properly conscientised and trained.

Evidence shows that 86% of the families living in poor countries in Latin America and the Caribbean region engaged in a high number of stimulating activities at home, with 60% of the 34-year-old children enrolled in centre-based ECD services (Rey-Guerra et al., 2022). While most African parents are busy with economic activities, in other regions parents involve themselves with ECD services for their children such as meeting teachers or other parents, participating in workshops, making or bringing learning and playing materials, volunteering to help inside the classrooms, administrative duties such as following up on teachers' attendance and helping to set up the ECD centre's budget and playing with their children (Rey-Guerra et al., 2022). Often in Africa, parents leave all those activities and duties to administrators or teachers at the centres and confine themselves to paying fees only at best or at worst think that ECD services are not relevant to their children's development at worst (Mwaipopo et al., 2018).

Presence of Government Support in Scaling the Initiative

Some authors (Olsen, 2023; Spiers et al., 2018), argue that government support is a critical enabling factor for scaling innovative educational interventions and that the support is normally given when the interventions address the incumbent government's agenda in defining and addressing education priorities. Evidence shows that the ultimate scaling decision is in the hands of the governments (Cavallera et al., 2019). Scaling does not happen in a vacuum but is influenced by the broader environment (including priorities, politics, and power dynamics at both national and local levels) in which scaling takes place (Wyss et al., 2023). The IHELP team needs to negotiate a delicate balance between their intended scaling strategy and the broader political and policy goals in the countries where it is operating. All scaling depends on government buy-in and community support as fundamental to success (Wyss et al., 2023). Olsen (2023) further warned that sometimes elections do disrupt scaling decisions and processes. Nonetheless, in the all the three countries involved in the project, elections are over and did not interrupt the implementation processes. Government officials from the Ministries of Education at national and local levels are at the core of scaling the IHELP project.

Need for more Schools by the communities.

One enabler for scaling the IHELP model is the need for schools in the marginalised areas where we project is operating in. This has seen some communities in Zimbabwe requesting the IHELP team for support in building full-fledged primary schools. To those requests, the IHELP insist that their goal is to provide ECD services to such marginalised communities and that they do not have enough technical and financial support for establishing the schools. The hunger for schools is necessitated by the very long distances between the homes for the children and their nearest schools. In Zimbabwe some pupils travelling long distances with some passing through mountains, thick forests and even rivers. The long distances are barrier for access to education for ECD pupils especially those with

disabilities compromising their enrolment, attendance, participation, and retention in schools (Rukanda&Chipunza, 2019).

Mwaipopo et al. (2021) reported that in Botswana, as is the case with many other African countries, rural environments pose challenges for ECD children receiving educational services due to long distances between schools and homes. Parents end up stopping their children from accessing ECD services due to long distances. Indeed, many marginalised areas are geographically isolated thereby delaying the transition of ECD children to schools. Grimes et al. (2023) further write that in many African countries such as Zimbabwe and Uganda, long distances to school, inaccessible roads, and difficult terrain further restrict children with disabilities from going to school. There is clearly a need to prioritize improving the accessibility of schools. The IHELP project is a noble effort to provide access to early learning among children with disabilities in rural and marginalised communities.

Cultural Rootedness of the IHELP Model

The IHELP model has great potential for scaling due to its cultural rootedness. A usual barrier for scaling educational interventions in Africa is that most such interventions are not inclusive of all ethnic and cultural groups (Mwaipopo et al., 2021). The IHELP model is designed with respect to the culture of the contexts in which it is offered. Indeed, the fact that the parents of the children are also teachers makes it possible for the model to be culturally sensitive to the contexts of the children. The children will learn in their local languages and use local plays and games. The current education system in many African countries is not inclusive of all cultural and ethnic minority groups (Mwaipopo et al., 2021). The education curriculum, including the current ECCE policy, does not make provision for linguistic minorities. Many teachers from mainstream groups in Africa refrain from serving in ethnic minority areas because of language and cultural barriers and carry cultural and personal attitudes which do not support child learning (Mwaipopo et al. 2021).

The cultural and ethnic barrier is indicative of negative relations between teachers and learners or teachers and parents of young children. Children are unable to express themselves and teachers are unable to communicate with children. As a result, children suffer adversely when taught in a language other than their mother tongue leading to failure and dropout rates (Mwaipopo et al. 2021). Participation in ECD programmes enhances children's language development as they engage in conversation with peers and teachers through play, song, and reading. The use of children's home language or mother tongue is important as it provides continuity of learning between home and school.

Indeed, one key innovation in the IHELP involves making parents children's teachers at school. Innovative ECD interventions should allow language-minority, indigenous and/or remote populations to propose culturally based approaches in the designing and implementation of ECD innovations (Spiers et al., 2018). Spiers et al. (2018) suggest that teaching of children of the Turkana pastoralist groups of Northern Kenya should infuse relevant acquisition of life skills with school preparedness skills. An example

of this is the Madrasa experience in Kenya where religious learning and formal schooling were incorporated into early childhood education programmes (Spiers et al., 2018).

Community Leadership of the Centres

Innovative and scalable ECD interventions should provide the children's parents opportunities to own and run the ECD centres (Mwaipopo et al., 2021). Mwaipopo wrote that most groundbreaking ECD interventions in America and Europe offered parents the opportunities to learn parenting skills, family literacy, parent leadership skills, healthcare services and opportunities to run the centres themselves. In support of this view, Cavallera et al. (2019) highlight that leadership of the innovations by parents is critical for successful design and implementation of the scaling. There is need for people with personal qualities and creativity (champions) to lead the efforts and champion family volunteers to address the lack of formally trained staff in some settings (Cavallera et al., 2019). Cavallera et al. (2019) further write that there is need for capacity building of these champions through training and technology support.

Strong leadership is deemed as key to scale-up, including 'champions' who are committed to the project, believe in it and can convince others to follow them. Indeed, champions are important for successful scaling-up of educational interventions (Cavallera et al., 2019). Champions are critical in driving the scaling process as play a critical function advocating for an initiative, supporting implementers to navigate the education system, and helping drive scaling processes forward (Wyss et al., 2023). A key enabler of scaling is in establishing and maintaining a network of in-country champions across the ecosystem who will support the process who can include stakeholders at different levels of government; representatives from relevant civil society organizations, and other professional organizations; researchers; implementing partners and parents (Olsen, 2023). Champion turnover is a key barrier for scaling innovations (Wyss et al., 2023). Whenever, a key champion changed positions, retired, or was replaced it would create hazards as new ones may have different strategies and goals. Strategies to mitigate turnover include cultivating champions at more technical levels of ministries and organizations; convening multi-stakeholder groups who could serve as advocates for an initiative and diversifying support across multiple ministries (Wyss et al., 2023).

Presence of Hubs Models

For scaling, hubs acting as models are needed. The IHELP model has shown to be an impactful hub that has helped many marginalised rural children. The "Hub" based models of pre-primary education where a high-quality village becomes a model and a resource for surrounding villages (Spier et al., 2018). For example, the Kidogo model used in Kenya establishes quality ECD centres that serve as "best practice" models for a community, providing training, resources and mentoring for local women who then start their own centres (Spiers et al., 2018). While this is a for-profit enterprise, the model itself demonstrates how quality ECD programming can be scaled (Spiers et al., 2018). Gelly et al. (2022)

conducted a study to estimate the benefits and efficacy of using community-based early childhood development (ECD) centers as platforms for an intervention promoting agricultural production and nutrition among households with young children in Malawi. They provided agricultural support in the form of inputs, trainings, agricultural extension linkages, village savings and loans groups to the parents of the children in their ECD projects.

Wyss et al. (2023) urge researchers at the hubs to be flexible and take up different roles and to balance different roles of as implementers, government partners, and researchers. These raise the challenge of trying to be both implement a project and maintain a critical researcher perspective at the same time. The hub or lab creates opportunities for reflecting aimed to help teams draw from improvement science to navigate this balance. Researchers need to ensure that the innovation is flexible since fully integrating it into the educational system involves losing the initiative's branding (as the IHELP model) and links to the outside organisations such as partner universities in the different countries and the funders yet that may risk future funding and visibility when the originating organization is no longer associated with the initiative (Wyss et al., 2023).

Unhelpful views in the communities on educating children with disabilities.

Children with disabilities are among the most excluded from education and they are disproportionately less likely to attend school than children without disabilities at all levels, and when they do access school, they are more likely to repeat a grade or drop out (Grimes et al., 2023). In many African countries, many children with disabilities in rural areas are not in school (Rukanda & Chipunza, 2019) and they face an increased risk of experiencing violence due to disability statuses (Grimes et al., 2023). During scaling, the IHELP team needs to fight the challenges of communities who do not think that it is important to offer education to children with disabilities. Children with disabilities lack many services such as identification and assessment, training material and the long distance to school issue.

Furthermore, in Africa many cultural and religious beliefs attribute children's disabilities (whether physical, developmental, or psychosocial) to curses, incest, a punishment for past-life sins or sins committed by family members (Clark et al., 2024). This forces families with such children to hide their children or seek spiritual solutions, rather than present their children for assessment at a health or educational facility. Some families may expel such children from their families and deny them rights to names and identities. This factor creates hesitancy in many families in bringing their children to the programme. In Zimbabwe, the enrolment of children with disabilities is at 0.85% way below the target of 25% (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Statistics Report, 2018). The exclusion of children with disabilities is compounded by the lack of properly trained teachers, inadequate appropriate facilities, and limited teaching materials (Rukanda & Chipunza, 2019). The interplay of poverty disability, superstition, ignorance, fear, lack of knowledge, pervasive mythical cultural practices and belief systems,

weak and unresponsive institutional structures and systems sustain a stigma machinery that accentuates exclusion processes at individual, family, society and in institutional spaces (Dube et al., 2021).

Lack of the Requisite Government Financial Support

Governments may approve the innovations and their scaling, but sustainability of these scaling process hinges on government funding. One key barrier to scaling the IHELP model is lack of government funding. It is very easy to scale the models in a few years but for sustainable and long-term scaling, government funding is necessary. Funding from the communities and donors can be secured in the short term, but in the long-term financial support from governments is very important. Wyss et al. (2023) argue that sustainable financing is both critical for scaling but difficult to secure and that scaling need more than 10 years hence the need for long term financing. Securing long-term financing faces the challenge of constrained government education budgets, especially after COVID-19 (Wyss et al., 2023). To secure government budgetary support Wyss et al. (2023) recommend the negotiating with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance and other governing bodies responsible for determining education budgets.

Only a few African countries (5 out of 21 they mapped) allocated some funds for special or inclusive education yet funding inclusive education is costly (Grimes et al., 2023). For example, in Angola, 6.47 per cent of the national budget is allotted to the education sector, and only 0.01 per cent is allocated to special education while in Eswatini, special education shares 0.4 per cent of the total education budget (Grimes et al. 2023). What is clear is that many African governments have developed supportive legislative and policy environments yet are lagging in funding. In Zimbabwe, the government seem unconvinced on the benefits of ECD and the lack of financial has hampered universal access to ECD services (Baboo & Walker, 2020). Many schools in Sub-Saharan Africa are resource constrained leading to low budgets for issues of disability (Dube et al., 2021).

Undervaluing of Early Child Development in the Communities

Parents do not appreciate the value of ECD and prefer to spend money on post-ECD schooling which they view to have more tangible outcomes (Baboo & Walker, 2020; Rukanda & Chipunza, 2019; Spier et al., 2018). In addition, early childhood education is frequently perceived as a female-dominated, non-professional enterprise associated more with basic caregiving than with learning (Spier et al., 2018). Furthermore, variation of ECD practices and use of rote learning makes it peripheral and low priority. For example, among the Turkana pastoralist community of Northern Kenya, the limited uptake of pre-primary education has been linked to the divorce of ECD programmes and services from their local or cultural conceptions of learning, values, and belief systems.

Many parents are not conscientized on the relevance and place of ECD in the education system (Mwaipopo et al., 2021). Many educated rural parents in Uganda whom themselves had not accessed ECD services and deem it irrelevant for their children since they successfully studied at primary, secondary, and University levels without it (Tashobya, 2012). Children in many African families receive poor or minimal parental involvement in their education as many of the parents are too busy with their socio-economic activities (Mwaipopo et al., 2021). One key barrier for scaling the IHELP project is that ECD services are undervalued in Africa.

Policy Recommendations

1. Disseminate findings from the IHELP project widely including in publication formats.
2. Conduct more research studies on scaling to increase scaling literature from Africa.
3. Establish more and stronger collaborations with different stakeholders including government officials, civil society groups and professional associations.
4. Provide more capacity building for parents to ensure community ownership of the IHELP centres by ensuring that parents get more skills and involvement in the learning of their children.
5. Conduct further studies on cultural and indigenous knowledge that either promote or hinder learning among marginalised children especially children with disabilities.
6. Involve parents in the centre activities including play pedagogies using community customs while ensuring socioemotional and physical stimulation of the children.
7. Make children with disabilities and their families central in the centres to deal with negative community perceptions on children with disabilities.

Conclusion

The IHELP project promises to be a game changer in provision of inclusive early learning in marginalised communities. ECD services, especially those that serve marginalised children, inclusive of children with disabilities, are least developed in Africa. The IHELP model is based on the premise that communities should invest more in the early learning of their children particularly in marginalised communities. The challenge is that most educational innovations do not scale well. It is therefore important for researchers to invest in assessing factors that hinder and those that promote scaling educational innovations. Researchers need to be skilled in negotiating with government officials, stakeholders, and parents to develop a team of champions who advocate for scaling of educational initiatives. As it stands, the IHELP model has great potential for scaling. Nonetheless, there is need for strategic trade-off between originality to ensure impact and continued support from the funders and flexibility to meet the needs of different stakeholders including the relevant governments. Ultimately, scaling of the project should involve its adoption as a policy by the

different government. The IHELP centres can become centres for learning and empowerment for all community members. Schools and school officials should be at the centre of these initiatives.

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