Every day, more children are making gains in health and learning after receiving early childhood development (ECD) interventions. Ensuring that “all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education” is now an explicit goal for the United Nations through 2030, but significant progress remains to be made to make quality early childhood programs accessible to all, including the poorest and most vulnerable.

The evidence base on the benefits of ECD is robust and growing. Less well known are practical examples of programs whose features have promise, especially related to ECD for disadvantaged children. The Center for Education Innovations (CEI) has identified more than 110 ECD programs implementing innovative solutions to improve both access and quality of ECD for the poor and marginalized.
## COMMON THEMES ACROSS PROGRAMS

This database at a glance highlights eight common approaches and characteristics across documented ECD models.

### 1. Close engagement of community members:

Several programs closely engage with community members and parents, both to equip them with the skills necessary to provide stimulation and support for their own children, as well as to gain buy-in and support for ECD programming from community members more broadly.

The ELIMU Community Light ECD program, for example, places a strong emphasis on increasing community involvement in the provision of ECD services in Tanzania. The group hosts various seminars and workshops, conducts regular parent meetings, and supports grassroots community outreach efforts.

INCLUDED’s ECD program in China operates classes for parents to develop children’s linguistic, cognitive, athletic, and social skills. Both parents and children are involved in every class activity in order to ensure that parents become close collaborators of their children’s learning and gain the skills needed to support their children’s development outside class.

### 2. Strengthening the ECD workforce:

Children in their early years often require specialized curricula and pedagogy for their age and stage of development. Training and support for early childhood workers form an integral component of many ECD programs on CEI.

The Daraja Early Care and Education Program – Watoto Wonder Bus in Kenya, for example, is a mobile teacher training program that leverages a team of early childhood experts to train and support local teachers and childcare center managers. The program specifically targets ECD programs in areas where staff are unable to access training opportunities, and provides training and support in areas such as curriculum planning, teacher empowerment, and the development of appropriate early childhood practices.

Several programs profiled on CEI train and recruit women from the local community to become ECD caregivers. These programs work to meet a critical shortage in ECD professionals, while simultaneously providing important career options for local populations, especially women. For example, Hippocampus Learning Centres in India recruit primarily female teachers from the

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rural villages where centers are located and where livelihood options are limited, and provide them with rigorous training. Likewise, BRAC Pre-primary Schools recruit women from local communities in Bangladesh who hold at least ten years of schooling experience and a senior school certificate as teachers. BRAC provides these teachers with extensive training on student-centered and hands-on pedagogical techniques.

3. Comprehensive programming combining education with interventions in nutrition, health, and parenting:

A defining feature of many of the ECD programs featured in the CEI database is a focus on delivering a holistic set of services that emphasize not only education and development, but just as importantly, interventions in health, nutrition, and parenting.

aeioTU, a chain of ECD centers in Colombia, has designed an integrated early childhood intervention model that seeks to support children’s transition to primary school. aeioTU centers provide classes for children to prepare them for their next academic phase, as well as services designed to improve children’s health (vaccinations and support for gestating mothers), nutrition (the program covers 70% of children’s daily nutritional needs within the ECD centers themselves), and family dynamics (the program provides workshops focused on parenting and early childhood support).

The Lively Minds ECD programs in Ghana and Uganda aim to develop not only foundational learning skills such as literacy, numeracy and creative thinking through play, but likewise actively promote hygiene and healthy habits.

4. Engaging and collaborating with government:

As quality ECD requires high caregiver to student ratios and more specialized education and training, provision can be costly. Especially where there is a lack of public provision and investment, quality services may not be available to all, and especially poor families. Government buy-in and
support can be critical in ensuring access to quality ECD services. Several programs work closely to align their interventions with government policies, or to engage government at the national or sub-national level.

The Mulumbo Early Childhood Care and Development program in Zambia runs a chain of community-run ECD centers, but also aims to increase the attention afforded to ECD issues at the national level. To achieve this, it works collaboratively with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, children, parents, and caregivers to generate awareness of and commitment to ECD. The program runs training and sensitization sessions, facilitates policy dialogue meetings, and distributes information related to ECD.

The Ilifa Labantwana Sobambisana Initiative in South Africa supports the development and testing of ECD programs in under-served communities in order to build the evidence base for effective, scalable ECD programs with the ultimate goal of improving access to and quality of ECD services in the country. Since identifying promising models for take-up, Ilifa Labantwana has been applying the initiative’s findings to different levels of government and is currently collaborating with the North West Provincial government to provide ECD services to 60 to 70 percent of children in the region.

**5. Emphasis on play:**

Research has shown that play can have a significant impact on developing foundational skills during children’s early years that prepare them for future schooling and learning. As a result, several of CEI’s ECD programs actively promote play for young children.

The High Scope Training of Trainers Program implemented by Khululeka in South Africa, for example, trains adults to participate in children’s play and development through the High Scope Active Learning Approach. Their training model is based on the premise that young children learn best through play in a stimulating environment, encouraged by supportive adults.

Chalk House Play and Learn Centers in Nigeria seek to demonstrate to both children and parents that lifelong learning capabilities can be developed through recreational tools such as games, toys, technology, and children’s books. The centers support the development of children’s literacy and numeracy skills, and in particular target disadvantaged children aged 18 months to 12 years who have missed opportunities for early childhood education and cannot access quality education services.

Photo courtesy of UNICEF Mobile Ger Kindergartens, Mongolia
6. Provision through chains and networks:

Several of the ECD models identified thus far exist as chains, delivering ECD through centers in multiple villages, regions, or even countries.

Developing a standardized yet flexible model of ECD delivery through chains can facilitate the replication and expansion of such programs, such as BRAC’s pre-primary schools, which have expanded from operating solely in Bangladesh to now include Pakistan, the Philippines, and in the future, Afghanistan. In some cases, ECD chains employ innovative financing structures, such as aeioTU which uses a cross-subsidization model whereby fee-paying ECD centers in high-income areas offset the costs of free ECD centers serving vulnerable, low-income populations. Chains also provide the potential for social franchising as a means of scaling or replicating the program, something which aeioTU plans to pursue in the coming years.

7. Mobile ECD centers serving nomadic communities:

Often excluded from ECD services as a result of their mobile lifestyle, nomadic communities remain some of the hardest-to-reach populations for ECD and education provision more broadly. Several programs have developed innovative solutions to reach children of nomadic populations.

The Kalokutanyang Mobile School in Kenya, for example, is a mobile school that consists of an ECD center and a primary school, and provides access to basic education for children
of pastoralist communities. Operated as part of UNICEF’s MobileSchools project in conjunction with the Kenyan Ministry of Education, the program provides early childhood development kits, as well as teaching and learning materials for basic education.

A similar model is the Mobile Ger Kindergartens program in Mongolia implemented by UNICEF Mongolia with strong support from the Mongolian Ministry of Education and Science. The program provides mobile kindergartens that take place in gers, traditional Mongolian dwellings, and target hard-to-reach children of nomadic herder families. The tent structures are easy to build and move, and thus operating costs are kept much lower than for regular pre-schools. The mobile kindergartens follow the nomadic families who move around 6 to 8 times during the warm season when the kindergartens operate.

CONCLUSION

Starting early has a significantly positive impact on children’s development, and parents and educators around the world are striving to prepare young girls and boys for a lifetime of education and success. Exciting developments in the field of ECD can be seen as programs aim to improve their effectiveness through a variety of approaches. Programs focusing on community engagement are working to make ECD interventions more locally relevant and sustainable. Others are working to train new teachers and caregivers to meet the unique needs that ECD practice requires. Innovations in playful learning techniques, public-private partnerships and chains of schools are more prevalent. Still, we recognize that ECD programs in the CEI database are regionally narrow, and will continue to work to highlight the wider breadth of programs. In addition, CEI plans to develop a resource for the early childhood field, focused on making knowledge around early childhood research and practice easily accessible to innovators and practitioners.

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