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Political Prioritization of Early Childhood Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Comparative Policy Analysis of Low- and Middle-Income Countries

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Abstract

Despite strong evidence of its importance to the welfare of children and societies, early childhood education has been comparatively neglected as a policy priority both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper seeks to understand what factors have contributed to the lack of priority for early childhood education in distance learning and school reopening plans, by applying a political prioritization framework to the pandemic context in four low- and middle-income countries: Ethiopia, Jamaica, Liberia, and Pakistan. Some aspects of the pre-COVID-19 status quo, which disfavored early childhood education, have continued, including a lack of cohesive support from civil society and a greater focus by international partners on norm promotion and technical assistance than financing. In other respects, the pandemic put early childhood education at an even greater disadvantage. These include perceptions that early childhood education is less suited to distance delivery than other levels of education, concerns about young children's ability to comply with health protocols, and competition with high-stakes examinations for education ministries' attention. Previous country experience with pandemics (in Liberia) and a strong coordinating entity (in Jamaica) were mitigating factors. These results point to an urgent need to elevate priority for early childhood education in normal times and improve the resilience of early childhood education in future crises.

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Political Prioritization of Early Childhood Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparative Policy Analysis of Low- and Middle-Income Countries

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a shock to education systems without historical precedent. Approximately 1.5 billion children around the world have faced interruptions in their education due to school closures and rolling lockdowns (UNICEF, 2020b). Despite strong evidence that quality early learning experiences are critical to child well-being and lifelong human capital formation, there is a growing recognition in the international policy community that early childhood education (ECE) is at a particular disadvantage relative to other levels of education during this crisis (Kim & Rose, 2020; Lopez Boo, et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020b). Among other challenges, young children (0-8 years) are least able to independently take advantage of remote-learning opportunities, and both governments and households are likely to prioritize learning for older children (World Bank, 2020b). The World Bank (2020) cautions that, "crisis-driven weakening of early childhood development and foundational learning…will mean lower learning trajectories for a whole generation" (p. 12).

Given these concerns about the impacts of COVID-19 for young children's development and learning, it is critical to understand how to preserve political priority to ECE policy and provision during this crisis and as countries recover from it. Shiffman and Smith (2007) define political prioritization as "the degree to which international and national political leaders actively give attention to an issue, and back up that attention with the provision of financial, technical, and human resources that are commensurate with the severity of the issue" (p. 1370). Through a comparative policy analysis, this paper seeks to better understand which factors facilitate or impede efforts to maintain the political prioritization of ECE. Focusing on the experiences of Ethiopia, Jamaica, Liberia, and Punjab Province, Pakistan, the paper contributes to the existing literature on the risks of pandemics to early learning and to policy discussions about potential

strategies to mitigate the threats of COVID-19 and related crises to early learning opportunities, particularly in the Global South.

Risks of the pandemic to young children

The negative effects of the global health emergency and economic downturn on young children have been immediate and have the potential to be long-lasting (Tomlinson et al., 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2020). As a result of COVID-19, maternal and child mortality and morbidity are predicted to increase dramatically. Young children are more likely to experience poverty and food insecurity, the loss or serious illness of a caregiver, and disruptions to essential services which put them at serious developmental risk (Yoshikawa et al., 2020). As the pandemic-induced financial crisis continues, at least 142 million more children in developing countries are expected to be pushed into household poverty (UNICEF, 2020a). According to analyses by UNICEF and Save the Children, the number of children without access to education, health care, housing, nutrition, water and/or sanitation services in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) increased by 15 percent in 2020 (Save the Children & UNICEF, 2020). Rising hunger and malnutrition, violence in the home, child labor and delayed health care (e.g., immunizations, screenings, HIV/AIDS treatment) compound the short- and long-term risks to children's development, health, and learning (Yoshikawa et al., 2020).

During the rapid brain development that takes place during the early years, young children are particularly sensitive to both positive and adverse influences in their environments (Benner & Mistry, 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2021). To prevent or mitigate the negative consequences of acute stress and cumulative health, nutrition and psycho-social adversities on young children, a multi-faceted approach is needed (Desmond et al., 2020; Yoshikawa et al., 2020). Alongside child-

sensitive health and social protection policies,[1] nurturing relationships with a trusted adult can help young children build resilience during this critical point in their development (Gromada et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2021).

Without adequate government support, parents – and disproportionately mothers – have struggled to balance caregiving and paid employment (Gromada et al., 2020). As parents navigate the persistent stress and isolation of the pandemic, they report increased mental health challenges and child behavior problems (Yoshikawa et al., 2020). Stay-at-home orders, school closures, physical distancing, and quarantines have limited young children's regular interactions with extended family members, teachers, and friends and reduced opportunities for cognitive and social stimulation outside the home (UNICEF, 2020b; Yoshikawa et al., 2020). Given the disproportionate health and economic impacts of the pandemic on low-income and more vulnerable families, COVID-19 will likely widen socio-economic disparities in child development (Tomlinson et al., 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2020).

Lessons from previous shocks

While there are limited studies about the influence of the current and previous pandemics on the health and well-being of young children, life course theory and evidence from other shocks suggest that we should be concerned about the long-term implications of early life exposure to the COVID-19 pandemic (Benner & Mistry, 2020). Longitudinal tracking of individuals who were conceived, in utero, or in early childhood during previous pandemics (e.g., 1918/19 influenza, HIV/AIDS), epidemics (SARS, Ebola), natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes and floods), and famines (e.g., 1959-61 Chinese famine, Dutch hunger winter) provides some insight. This research

[1] Child-sensitive interventions include emergency food provision, health care, child benefits/cash transfers, parent support.

suggests that prenatal and early childhood exposure to shocks is associated with life-long negative consequences, including lower educational attainment and lifelong earnings, as well as both health (e.g., obesity and noncommunicable diseases) and mental health problems (e.g., depression, schizophrenia) (Lopez Boo, et al., 2020; Shumba et al., 2020; Yoshikawa et al., 2020).

Although the world has yet to experience a dual health and educational crisis of the current magnitude, some research on previous school closures (e.g., teacher strikes in Argentina in the early 1980s; severe flooding in Thailand in 2011) has found that lost learning time has the greatest effect on the youngest students (e.g., elementary school age) (Aldeman, 2020). Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds also are more vulnerable to the threat of school closures to human capital accumulation. Research carried out after the Ebola crisis in West Africa, for example, found that girls were less likely to return to school (Malala Fund, 2020). After the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, children (ages 3-14) who lived closer to the fault line lost the equivalent to 1.5 grades of learning compared to those living further away. Learning losses were concentrated among children from less-educated, low-income families and were estimated to translate into a lifetime decrease in earnings of 15 percent (Andrabi et al., 2020).

The pandemic and early childhood education

The pandemic is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities in access to and quality of ECE provision, particularly in LMIC where resources are constrained and ECE systems are less established. Before COVID-19 hit, more than 80 percent of children were enrolled in preschool in high-income countries compared to only 20 percent in low-income countries (UNICEF, 2019). Despite the global expansion of early learning opportunities over the past two decades, around 175 million children lacked access to pre-primary education, with families from lower socio-economic

backgrounds and those living in more rural areas more likely to be excluded (UNICEF, 2019). Even before the pandemic, the lack of affordable, quality, accessible early care and education services led many parents to leave young children in environments that were not safe and enriching (Devercelli & Beaton-Day, 2020; Gromada et al., 2020).

With COVID-19 lockdowns leading to the closures of childcare and early education services – some temporary, some permanent – at least 40 million children worldwide have missed out on ECE in their critical pre-school year (Gromada et al., 2020).[2] An estimated 35 million children of pre-primary age were still affected by national school closures in December 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). Even in countries where schools are reopening, local and intermittent school closures are expected to continue (UNESCO et al., 2020b). In addition to the likely negative impact of school closures on school readiness and learning continuity, children may miss out on school meals and other supportive services (Borkowski et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2020b). There are also concerns that more disadvantaged children may not return to ECE due to financial barriers. In LMIC, parents spend considerable resources on education overall, and pre-primary education is often fee-based. Families experiencing unemployment and economic hardship are likely to prioritize constrained household expenditures on their older children's education (Al-Samarrai et al., 2020). As a result of supply and demand factors, UNESCO (2020) estimates that global enrollments at the pre-primary level could decline by nearly 3 percent.

These global disruptions to early learning are not only expected to impact recent gains in expanding access to pre-primary education, but also may yield lifelong consequences for children's educational trajectories and well-being (Benner & Mistry, 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2021), including significant losses to their earnings as adults (Lopez Boo, et al., 2020). Lack of

[2] More than 180 million children had their pre-primary schooling disrupted at the peak of COVID-19 school closures in April 2020 (Nugroho et al., 2020).

access to quality ECE is associated with delayed school entry, grade repetition and school dropout and lower educational achievement (Naudeau et al., 2011; UNICEF, 2019). In their simulations of the economic costs of preschool closures in 140 countries, Lopez Boo and colleagues (2020) estimate the median losses of a 6-month gap in pre-primary program participation to be about 3 percent of GDP in high-income and upper-middle income countries and closer to 1-2 percent of GDP in lower-income countries, where initial enrollments were lower (Lopez Boo, et al., 2020). Given that school closures in some countries have continued for almost a year, further losses in learning and earnings are expected.

Unequal access to technology and limited distance learning options have magnified the impacts of this crisis for the most vulnerable young children. While almost all countries around the world responded to the education crisis by offering digital and broadcast distance learning for primary and secondary education, only two-thirds included pre-primary students. Pre-primary teachers also are less likely to receive training and support in offering distance learning compared to their primary school counterparts (Nugroho et al., 2020).

In a 2020 UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank survey of 122 ministries of education, 73 countries reported that they provided one or more remote learning modalities for pre-primary students (Nugroho et al., 2020).[3] Countries were less likely to provide distance learning options, across different media, for ECE than for other levels of education (see Table 1). There is limited information on how many young children are regularly accessing these options. As with older children, challenges in reaching preschoolers in more rural and disadvantaged communities are expected. About 30 percent of pre-primary students globally are estimated to be reachable by

[3] These modalities include online learning platforms, television, radio, take-home materials, or mobile phone. Schools remained open in another 10 countries (Nugroho et al., 2020).

online or broadcast learning compared to 70 percent of primary students and more than 80 percent of upper-secondary students (Nugroho et al., 2020).

Table 1

Countries are less likely to provide distance learning options for ECE across all media

Percentage of countries offering distance learning by medium and level	ECE	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary
Radio	28	46	36	34
TV	42	61	66	65
Online	51	81	84	86
Paper-Based	40	59	55	53

Source: Authors' calculations of UNESCO et al., 2020 data

Unlike older students, young children typically cannot participate in distance learning without assistance from a parent or other caregiver (Gayatri, 2020). Equally concerning, less than half of the countries in the aforementioned survey reported providing guidance or materials to help parents and caregivers support young children's learning at home during school closures (Nugroho et al., 2020). Countries are also less likely to report having a plan for nation-wide reopening of ECE compared to primary and secondary education (UNESCO et al., 2020a).

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to threaten education provision and financing, not only through the immediate effects of school closures, but also through the longer-term impacts of the pandemic-induced economic recession (World Bank, 2020b). During previous economic crises, governments responded to budget shortfalls by reducing per capita student spending. Donor assistance to education has only recently recovered from the last global recession. The World Bank warns of a triple shock to education financing driven by stagnating or declining contributions from national governments, households, and international donors (Al-Samarrai et al., 2020). One in five

ministries of education surveyed in 2020 reported cutting their education sector budgets, and more than half have reallocated existing funds to cover COVID-19 related costs (UNESCO et al., 2020b).

Financing for ECE may be particularly vulnerable given that the sub-sector is persistently neglected by governments and donors. Even before the pandemic, aid for pre-primary education made up only 0.5 percent of total education aid in 2017, and levels declined from 2015 to 2017 (Zubairi & Rose, 2019). Although investment in early learning is critical for building efficient and effective education systems, low-income countries spent only 2 percent of their overall pre-pandemic education budgets on the pre-primary sub-sector (UNICEF, 2019). There is emerging evidence that countries are prioritizing the financing and provision of other levels of education over the early years, which threatens to stall or even reverse the slow and steady progress made in the sub-sector over the past decade (Nugroho et al., 2020).

Analytical framework

To study the extent to which ECE has appeared on the national political agendas during the pandemic, we apply a framework used primarily in global public health (Shiffman, 2007; Shiffman & Smith, 2007) and adapted for the ECE context by Authors (2021). The framework highlights five factors that shape political priority, summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Overview of five categories shaping political priority, as adapted for ECE

Category	**Key Questions in the COVID-19 Context**
Transnational influence	To what extent do international organizations promote prioritization of ECE by governments in the context of COVID-19, including through global norm setting, technical assistance, and financial resources?

Actor power	To what extent are actors engaged with ECE - including national political champions, guiding institutions, policy communities, and civil society - a strong and cohesive force in promoting ECE as a priority?
Ideas	How are COVID-era challenges and solutions for ECE understood and framed by political actors? How do the ideas themselves and the presence or absence of a consensus affect political attention to ECE?
Political contexts	How do features of the political environment - including major political changes, focusing events, and competing policy priorities - affect the prioritization of ECE in the COVID-19 context?
Issue characteristics	How is political prioritization affected by the features of the problem itself i.e. maintaining quality, equitable ECE in the pandemic context? This includes the availability of indicators on the severity of COVID-era challenges (e.g. access to distance learning methodologies in ECE) and the presence or absence of scalable and cost-effective solutions?

We apply this adapted political prioritization framework to the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic in four low- and middle-income countries: Ethiopia, Jamaica, Liberia, and Pakistan (Punjab Province). As discussed in more detail below, preschools and schools in these countries all closed in mid-March 2020 and have progressively reopened from June 2020 to October 2021. Through a comparative qualitative policy analysis, we investigate how Ministries of Education in the focus countries have prioritized (or failed to prioritize) ECE in their measures around *coping* with the initial impact of the pandemic and associated school closures; *managing continuity* as the "new normal" of remote learning and intermittent school closures set in; and efforts to *accelerate improvement* in education systems by taking advantage of crisis-induced innovations (World Bank, 2020b).

Even in pre-pandemic conditions, the political economy conditions to support sustained commitment to ECE were only partially present in these focus countries. A previous comparative analysis of Ethiopia, Liberia, Pakistan (Punjab Province), and Tanzania found strong rhetorical commitment to early learning but a lack of sustained follow-through and resource provision

(Authors, 2021). Two sets of factors were most decisive to placing ECE on the national political agenda between 2010 and 2020. First, national policy makers responded to global efforts to advance early childhood development, including goal setting, technical assistance, and to a limited degree funding. Second, ideas about the benefits of ECE gained significant traction in these countries. With few exceptions, however, civil society mobilization around ECE was relatively weak. Significant focusing events around ECE were rare, and high-level political champions were uncommon. Using this earlier analysis as a baseline, the paper takes stock of the extent to which government prioritization of ECE has strengthened or weakened in the context of the pandemic and which factors appear most decisive in these changes.

Methods

Research questions

We focus on three primary research questions:

1) To what extent have young learners been prioritized during school closures and reopening plans? What political and resource commitments have been made to support continuity of early learning?
2) How has political priority for ECE changed during the COVID-19 pandemic relative to pre-pandemic times?
3) Why is ECE less likely to be prioritized than other levels of education? Which political-economic factors shape the level of attention to ECE during the pandemic?

Data sources

The data for the paper come from a rapid, coordinated cross-country research effort on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for ECE systems under the auspices of the Early Learning

Partnership (ELP) Systems Research program. Managed by the World Bank and financed by the Government of the UK, ELP Systems Research currently supports country research teams working in Ethiopia, Jamaica, Liberia, and the province of Punjab, Pakistan. These country research teams have conducted early learning system diagnostics in each country and evaluations of system-level interventions since 2017.

The countries were selected for the ELP Systems Research program on the basis of the potential impact of the research, judged by the presence of ongoing or prospective scale-up of ECE services, policy maker demand for the research, and the presence of potential local research and implementation partners. As noted in Authors (2021), this tends to lead *prima facie* to a sample of countries with relatively favorable conditions for prioritization of ECE. The country set differs slightly from the countries analyzed previously due to a change in the focus countries between Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the ELP research program. The work in Tanzania did not continue in Phase 2 due to changes in the country context, while a new focus country, Jamaica, was added.

Between September 2020 and February 2021, the four Country Research Teams collected data from: (a) reviews of government policies, plans, and other relevant documents (e.g., news articles) and (b) semi-structured phone interviews with key government, school, and civil-society informants. These findings were synthesized into country reports organized around six themes: prioritization; coherence of response; learning at home; teachers; equity; and return to school. Given that this is an evolving policy area, we complemented the Country Research Team data collection with a targeted set of semi-structured interviews to fill in data gaps, including those related to recent policy developments.

Data analysis

Using the rubric developed for our previous analysis, we classified the degree to which each of the 13 factors is present and influential in each of the four cases (see Table 3). The rubric uses a three-point scale: low (*), medium (**), or high (***). Given that we collected and analyzed data at two time points for three of the four countries, we are able to use the pre-COVID-19 assessment as a baseline and compare it with the current situation (see Table 3).

Table 3

Factors influencing the degree to which ECE appeared on national policy agendas before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

Categories	**Factors**	**Ethiopia**		**Liberia**		**Punjab, Pakistan**		**Jamaica[1]**	
		Pre-COVID	**COVID era**	**Pre-COVID**	**COVID era**	**Pre-COVID**	**COVID era**		**COVID era**
Transnational Influence	Global norm promotion	**	**	***	**	***	**		**
	External resource provision	**	**	**	**	**	**		**
Actor power	Policy community cohesion	**	*	*	*	*	*		**
	National political entrepreneur - ship	**	*	*[2]	*	**[3]	*		**
	Guiding Institutions	***[4]	*	*	*	**[5]	**		***
	Civil Society Mobilization	*	*	*	*	**	**		**
Ideas	External frame	***	**	*	*	**	**		***
	Internal frame	***	**	*	**	*	**		**

Political contexts	Political transitions	**	**	**	**	**	**		**
	Competing priorities	*	*	**	*	*	*		*
	Focusing events	**	*	**	*	*	*		*
Issue Characteristics	Credible indicators	***	**	*	*	**	*		**
	Effective interventions	**	*	*	**	*	*		**

[1]Pre-COVID ratings are from Authors (2021). As Jamaica was not included in the earlier analysis, pre-COVID ratings are not included.
[2] The previous analysis noted differences in this factor between the present day and recent past. Historically, rating was *** in Liberia due to the political entrepreneurship by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf during her presidency.
[3] Historically, rating was in Punjab, Pakistan*.
[4] The previous analysis noted differences in this factor between national and regional levels. At the regional level in Liberia, the rating was **.
[5]At the district level in Punjab, the rating was *.

Evolving policy responses to the pandemic

Table 4 provides an overview of ECE policy and provision in the four focus countries prior to the pandemic. In the following section, we discuss the timing and nature of government responses, with a focus on the implications for ECE, from March 2020 to March 2021.

Ethiopia

The Government of Ethiopia closed all schools on March 15, 2020, affecting more than 26 million learners, including 3.2 million young children who were participating in pre-primary education. On April 8, the Prime Minister declared a 5-month State of Emergency, banned public gatherings, and required most employees to work from home.[4] The Ministry of Education prepared

[4] The government began relaxing these requirements in June and the State of Emergency was lifted in September.

a COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan (CERP), which detailed strategies to: support learning during school closure; raise awareness about COVID-19 and the need to keep children at home; prepare for safe reopening of schools; and support recovery of the education system once schools reopen (Ministry of Education, 2020). The government's pandemic response has focused more on primary and secondary education than on younger children. For example, there is only one mention of pre-school learners in the CERP, and radio programs did not include ECE content. Even simple measures by the educational system to ensure continuity of learning - such as communication between schools and caregivers during school closures - were largely absent. In a recent survey, only 12 percent of caregivers reported using radio lessons with their young children (Kim & Rose, 2020).

A phased reopening took place between October 19 and November 9, beginning with about 17,000 schools, mainly in rural areas. In the second phase, schools in regional towns and zones re-opened, followed by schools in Addis Ababa and the surrounding zones of Oromia in phase 3 (UNICEF Ethiopia, 2020). The government guidelines prioritized students in grades 8 and 12, who need to sit for the national examinations, followed by younger learners.

Jamaica

Jamaica's schools, including Early Childhood Institutions (ECIs), closed nationwide on March 13, 2020. The Early Childhood Commission (ECC), an agency of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Information (MOEYI), established a dedicated "COVID corner" webpage with resources and daily lesson plans for parents for children 0-5 years old. ECC and MOEYI pursued a range of strategies to ensure continuity of learning, including radio and TV programs targeted to early childhood, and distribution of printed materials to areas with poor internet access.

With support from ECC, early childhood teachers maintained regular contact with parents through WhatsApp.

A partial reopening was initially scheduled for September, but postponed to October due to fears of an infection surge following Jamaica's September 3 general elections, which used ECIs and other schools as polling places. As of January 2021, 436 ECIs (of approximately 2,700) had reopened for hybrid face-to-face and online instruction. Currently, there is a backlog of Ministry of Health (MOH) assessments which are required for schools to reopen.

Liberia

The Ministry of Education in Liberia announced the suspension of classes at all educational institutions on March 16, 2020. The announcement anticipated a two-week closure in response to a temporary health crisis, but by the end of that period official communications recognized that school closures would continue indefinitely. The Education Cluster, a forum for development partners to coordinate assistance in humanitarian crises, was relaunched. The government also began to broadcast distance learning programs on the radio, building on strategies and resources MOE had developed during the 2014-16 Ebola virus outbreak. The radio programs included ECE, but made no distinction between different levels of ECE, which officially has a four-year curriculum in Liberia. In May, the MOE's COVID-19 Education Emergency Response Plan (ERP) identified ECE as facing unique challenges, given the difficulty of delivering social and play-based learning remotely. The ERP also outlines seven priorities under a long-term "system strengthening" recovery plan, of which two relate explicitly to ECE: assessments for school readiness and professional development for all teachers, including those in ECE. However, ECE is not mentioned explicitly in the plan's budget or costing framework (Jeffery & McLaren, 2021).

In June, the MOE announced the reopening of school for grade 12 in preparation for regional examinations. Reopening for grades 6-11 followed in late July, but ECE through Grade 5 would reopen only with the new academic year in September. In the interim, MOE tasked ECE and primary school teachers with preparing materials for children to use at home. Key informants viewed the place of ECE in the COVID-19 response as similar to its place in the pre-COVID-19 system: not completely neglected, yet not prioritized, with a sense of regret that more could not be done (Jeffery & McLaren, 2021).

Pakistan (Punjab Province)

On March 13, 2020, the Federal Government of Pakistan closed all public and private educational institutions, affecting 40 million learners. In late March, the government required all non-essential industries to close and people in urban centers to stay home. In parallel, each of its provinces implemented varying levels of lockdown. A phased reopening of the economy began in April. The National Education Response and Resilience Plan for COVID-19 provides a framework of strategies and interventions to cope with the effects of the pandemic (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2020). Although the plan covers pre-primary to higher secondary education, there is minimal attention to ECE. During initial school closures, the federal government launched the Teleschool Initiative in collaboration with leading EdTech providers to broadcast free learning content to grades 1-12 students (Kashif & Khan, 2020). ECE content was developed for television and radio though it was generally inaccessible in rural areas (ITA, 2021). Guided by the federal plan and guidelines, the provincial Ministers of Education lead the education response and coordination of task forces/committees for their provinces.

A phased national reopening of schools began in September, starting with Classes 9 and 10, colleges and universities followed by secondary and primary education. In the hybrid approach, half the students attended on alternate days. After only six weeks, schools closed again and shifted to "home learning." In December, the government launched its first Radioschool to expand student outreach during the second school closure. A second national reopening began in January 2021. In Punjab, classes 9-12 reopened on January 18, and ECE through Grade 8 reopened January 25 on a hybrid basis. As of early March, all students attend full-time.

Table 4

Overview of ECE provision in the four case countries prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

	Ethiopia	**Jamaica**	**Liberia**	**Pakistan (Punjab Province)**
Main types of ECE provision	NGO-sponsored, privately owned, community, and government-subsidized pre-schools. The public O-Class is an optional, fee-free "Reception" year before children enter Grade 1.	Community operated basic schools, government infant schools, and kindergarten classes of privately owned preparatory schools.	Government, community-based or private preschools. Although the national ECE framework stipulates two years of ECE, schools offer between 1-3 years of ECE classes in practice.	State financed Government schools, Public Private Partnerships, ECE run by non-profit and for-profit private organizations. The "Katchi" class is a grade prior to formal schooling.
Target ages	5-6	3-5	3-5	3-5
Nat'l Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER)	29.4% (2015)	76.2% (2019)	125.2% (2017)	39% (2019)

Main gov't institution responsible	Ministry of Education	The Early Childhood Commission (ECC) within the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Information	Bureau for Early Childhood Education (BECE) in the Ministry of Education	The School Education Department (SED)
Is it Fee Free?	YES	YES	NO	YES
Is it Compulsory?	NO	NO	NO	YES

Sources: Jamil et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2011; Oxford Policy Management, 2019; Rossiter et al., 2018; World Bank EdStats

Results

The comparative analysis of the four focus countries is organized around the five categories in the analytical framework presented earlier: (1) transnational influence, (2) actor power, (3) ideas, (4) political contexts, and (5) issue characteristics. Where data are available, we highlight the extent to which political prioritization of ECE changed before and after the start of the pandemic in each focus country.

Transnational influence

Transnational influence refers to the role of international organizations in encouraging national governments to prioritize ECE in response to the pandemic through the promotion of *global norms* and the provision of *technical and financial resources*. As lockdowns began and schools closed around the world, the international community quickly mobilized to raise awareness about the needs of young children and potential strategies to support families, such as distance learning approaches. Global efforts to raise the visibility of ECD included rapid research, position

statements, guidance notes, and documentation of promising practices. These global goods were developed and disseminated by the Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN), regional early childhood networks, UNICEF, the World Bank, UNESCO, WHO, and others. There is limited evidence to date that global efforts shaped national government responses. For example, UNICEF, the World Bank, and UNESCO jointly issued *Guidance on Reopening Early Childhood Settings* in September 2020 (UNICEF et al., 2020). However, government plans in the focus countries did not reference this guidance and were not fully aligned with it. Due to the rapidly evolving situation, and competing priorities (discussed under "Issue Characteristics"), it is likely that there was little time and opportunity for global norms to influence national policy debates and decisions compared with pre-pandemic times.

In Ethiopia, Liberia, and Punjab, development partners, as part of the local education groups in these countries, contributed technical and financial support to the development of the governments' COVID-19 education response plans. As noted earlier, none of these plans accord more than minimal attention to young children and ECE provision. In terms of external resource provision, the international actors that were proponents of ECE prior to the pandemic (e.g., UNICEF, Save the Children, World Bank, FCDO, and others) continued their support to the sub-sector as part of their COVID-19 responses through a combination of reallocating existing financing and providing new emergency resources. As this financing was aligned with government priorities, ECE did not receive significant support. To partially address the limited attention to ECE in existing distance learning plans, two of the focus countries received small grants from the World Bank ELP to develop radio messages for parents (Ethiopia) and television content for young children (Punjab) (World Bank, 2020a).

The education system is Jamaica is less dependent on external assistance than the other three countries. Development partners like UNICEF and PACE Canada complemented the government's response efforts. For example, UNICEF supported the delivery of 1,100 early childhood play and learn packs to children under six in quarantined zones, and the development of a free online virtual instructional school leadership course taken so far by 1,200 school leaders. UNICEF established a parent helpline and created Public Service announcements on COVID-19, including a series for parents of children with disabilities, as well as an Instagram live with a well-known developmental pediatrician (UNICEF Jamaica, 2020).

Actor Power

Actor power considers the degree to which individuals and organizations are engaged in promoting ECE as a priority during the pandemic. Specifically, the strength of four factors – *policy community cohesion*, *national political entrepreneurship*, *guiding institutions*, and *civil society mobilization* – are important for advancing a particular issue on the national policy agenda. Across the focus countries, there was limited coordination of the COVID-19 response among the main ECE stakeholders and few high-level leaders championing the issue. Prior to the pandemic, there was limited civil society mobilization for early learning in Ethiopia and Liberia compared to Punjab and Jamaica, and this trend has continued during the COVID-19 response. Overall, development partners have focused more on emergency service delivery than influencing policy makers to prioritize policies and resources for ECE.

The policy communities for ECE – government officials, development partners, and others – have been relatively fragmented in their pandemic responses in Liberia and Ethiopia. Although the Education in Emergencies Committee in Liberia helped to create a shared narrative about the

extent and nature of the challenges posed by the pandemic and school closures, development partners commonly acted autonomously, focusing on their own programming rather than on a coordinated COVID-19 response. The ECE Bureau's activities are significantly dependent on donor resources. Aside from Teaching by Radio, during school closures a number of relatively small programs provided services that mirrored the priorities and reach of the development partners supporting them. The emphasis on ECE in these education initiatives was dependent on the preferences of the development partner involved. Some of these initiatives, such as the Kids' Educational Engagement Project, had a particular focus on ECE, but many did not (Jeffery & McLaren, 2021).

In contrast, in Punjab, a more unified pandemic response has emerged with clear roles for the different government agencies and active civil society engagement. Although SED has been the "apex institution" for implementing ECE since 2017, the Project Monitoring and Implementation Unit (PMIU) and Quaid e Azam Academy for Educational Development (QAED) have emerged as the major institutions governing ECE. While following directions set by the SED and the Punjab government, both agencies were involved in the training of ECE teachers as well as collating data from the field to develop response strategies. In parallel, CSOs have collaborated to create evidence on the effects of the pandemic on early learning, led trainings and community mobilization sessions, and engaged the policy community through activities like webinars to encourage buy-in on ECE work during the pandemic (ITA, 2021).

Jamaica stands out from the other cases for its strong guiding institutions which include representation and attention to ECE. The ECC provides cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder governance structure for ECD. During the pandemic, the Education in Emergencies Committee set up to respond to the crisis developed recommendations on various areas including

psychosocial, teacher training, educational progression, nutrition, and finance. This committee included representatives from the ECC, MOEYI, one ECI principal, board chair, and an educator. In addition, political entrepreneurs and civil society mobilization have helped maintain a focus on ECE. Jamaica is the only focus country where key informants identified a national champion for ECE during the crisis. Professor Maureen Samms-Vaughan, a globally-renowned researcher at the University of the West Indies and former Chair of the ECC, initiated and led high-profile activities that helped raise the visibility and attention to young children during the pandemic, including a town hall which featured national and international experts. Samms-Vaughan also contributed to the national task force that developed the protocols for reopening the ECIs.

Even in Jamaica, grassroots civil society and private sector organizations have focused more on service delivery than on pushing the government to act. While the ECC has tried to play the coordinating role, it has been challenging to keep up with the many local responses to the pandemic. While grassroots initiatives seek to address immediate ECE community needs, they can also influence public policy. As one example, a local entrepreneur set up "community blackboards" in inner-city communities to teach children who are not able to access other activities. The project quickly garnered support from UNICEF and other organizations and companies, and more recently from the MOEYI (Mckoy Phipps, 2020).

Ideas

Globally, early childhood proponents have faced difficulties in portraying the issue (*external frame*) in a way that resonates with political leaders who control resources. At the national level, the role of ideas in the political prioritization of early learning varies across contexts. Prior to the pandemic, for example, ECE struggled for public visibility in Liberia, whereas a strong

and compelling case for early learning had attracted a recent increase in political attention and resources in Ethiopia. When COVID-19 hit, awareness of the importance of the early years persisted, but it seems that the framing of the issue was insufficiently compelling to translate into greater prioritization.

Another way that ideas can shape prioritization is the extent of policy community agreement on the definition and causes of the problem and preferred solutions (*internal frame*). Across countries, there seems to be a general understanding that (a) young children are less susceptible to the worst consequences of the virus and (b) stay-at-home orders and preschool closures are likely to be detrimental to their learning. In contrast, there has been less consensus among those involved in making education policy decisions about what solutions would be best for young children – how to deliver effective distance learning for preschoolers as well as how to reopen schools safely while mitigating further "learning losses." This fragmentation made it difficult for governments to mount a strong and coherent response during school closures as well as in reopening plans.

In Liberia, for example, the Education Response Plan noted that during school closures: "Young pre-school aged children are also likely to miss out given that their social and play-based learning style is not easily supported through distance learning" (p.14). During the Ebola epidemic, most children did not participate in distance learning, and teaching by radio had limited reach in certain regions. There were similar concerns about whether and how to effectively reach young children during COVID-19 school closures. At the same time, there was a perception that pre-primary students would have the greatest difficulty complying with health regulations, and thus posed the greatest risk of transmitting the virus when schools reopened (Jeffery & McLaren, 2021).

Development partners in Ethiopia also raised these concerns. Ultimately, young children were underserved by distance learning and were among the last to return to school.

In Punjab, where ECE is gradually being mainstreamed into the education system, the official reopening policy initially did not mention ECE at all; many schools kept younger children home until they received clarification from the government. As schools reopened, children returned on alternate days to reduce classroom density and allow for physical distancing even though headteachers and parents preferred daily attendance to address "learning losses".[5] Concerns about these "learning losses" also led teachers, headteachers and district officials to disagree with the policy of children advancing from ECE to the next grade (ITA, 2021) (see "Issue Characteristics" for further discussion on reopening of schools).

Political Contexts

Changes in political contexts, including *political transitions* and *focusing events,* did not notably aid or hinder prioritization of ECE during the first months of the COVID-19 emergency, given the relatively short time horizon and the all-consuming nature of the pandemic itself as an event. Jamaica held general elections on September 3, which returned the incumbent government – led by Prime Minister Andrew Holness, a previous Minister of Education – to power. The new Minister of Education, Fayval Williams, had previously been Minister of Science, Energy and Technology. Some key informants noted that the Ministry's priorities focused on skills for science and technology, but that the institutional strength of ECC ensured a continuity of prioritization for ECE.

[5] As of early March, all schools opened full-time. However, they have been closed again intermittently as subsequent waves of pandemic have arrived.

Across all countries, ECE's priority suffered from the *competing priority* of preparing students taking high-stakes examinations. Of 116 countries that responded to UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank's (2020) survey only six countries with high-stakes examinations at the end of the secondary cycle reported canceling them outright in 2020, and 11 reported introducing alternative assessments. The majority of countries either postponed the examinations or implemented them with some combination of staggered administration, social distancing, and reduced curricular content. In Liberia, the government decided in June to reopen schools immediately for older grades in preparation for regional examinations, while the return to school for ECE through Grade 5 would wait for next academic year. In Jamaica, MOEYI prioritized students preparing for the Primary Exit Profile (PEP) examination, which determines placement in selective secondary schools, and for regional examinations such as the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC). Key informants in Ethiopia and the Punjab also reported a government preference for focusing reopening and distance learning provision for the students taking examinations most immediately.

Issue Characteristics

The final category captures the extent to which the features of the policy challenge itself - maintaining continuity of learning in ECE during the pandemic – enable or impede its prioritization by policy makers. The availability and strategic deployment of *credible indicators* facilitates recognition of the issue as a problem and enables actors to monitor progress toward addressing it. The availability of *effective interventions* also favors political prioritization; it is easier for an issue to gain traction when cost-effective, readily implementable, and evidence-based solutions are available.

The primary sources of relevant data were pre-pandemic household surveys on availability of information and communication technologies (e.g. mobile phones, radio, television) and, in some countries, household phone surveys launched after the pandemic began. In Ethiopia, researchers financed by Research on Improving Systems in Education (RISE) and ELP mobilized data within weeks of school closures to demonstrate low and unequal access to radio and mobile phone technology, as well as possible constraints to parents in supporting learning at home (Kim & Rose, 2020). The same group completed a caregiver phone survey in August and September of 2020. They documented limited access to children's books in homes, continued large urban/rural divisions in access to technology, very little contact between schools and parents, and increases in behavioral problems among ECE-age children (Kim et al., 2020). However, in Ethiopia's case the lack of effective interventions seems to have impeded government action on these issues. The lack of an existing platform for distance learning at the ECE level was a major challenge, in contrast to primary education where radio programming already existed and could be adapted to the pandemic context.

In Liberia, by contrast, data were not readily available, but the country's previous experience with distance learning during the Ebola crisis provided a head start on interventions. Public documents on the education response make few references to data, although the Emergency Response Plan (ERP) makes reference to collection of data and a monitoring and evaluation strategy. Among key informants, there was a consensus that radio-based ECE programming was a necessary effort to provide some level of service under difficult circumstances, and that the development of both materials and experience during the Ebola crisis was critical. However, the limitations of the medium meant that radio was not seen as a good substitute for in-person instruction. Key informants noted that the child-centered and play-based methodologies desired

for ECE translate poorly to radio, and limited access for rural and poor families compounded existing inequities in service provision (Jeffery & McLaren, 2021).

In Jamaica, the COVID-19 response in ECE benefited both from greater availability of credible indicators and a wider variety of available interventions. Data sources included follow-up phone interviews with a subsample of households from JAKIDS, a long-running birth cohort study, conducted from April to June 2020; and a UNICEF study of a random sample of households with at least one child, conducted in June and July 2020 (Samms-Vaughan & Pellington, 2021). Parents of ECE-age children were much more likely to report receiving educational materials from school "few or no days per week" relative to parents of primary- and secondary-age children. The surveys also surfaced concerns about equity of access, insufficient support for home-based learning, and increasing levels of violence. At the same time, the response benefited more than in the other countries from existing resources which could be leveraged for continuity of learning. For example, WhatsApp was already in widespread use for parent-teacher communication, so teachers were able to continue using the medium to share learning materials and encouragement for home-based learning activities. The ECC used this network as well as its social media presence to direct parents to a dedicated webpage for children 0-5 years old (https://ecc.gov.jm/covid-19-corner/) with lesson plans, storytelling and tips for parents.

Discussion

Across many factors, the COVID-19 era conditions for prioritization of ECE represented a continuation of the status quo, which resulted in relatively low prioritization in these four countries/regions. Both before and during the crisis, resource provision from donors and

international organizations consisted of technical support and a modest degree of financial resources, relative to basic education. Civil society mobilization has continued to be low, in most countries, and political transitions have not elevated ECE as an issue.

For several factors, COVID-19 worsened conditions in a way which particularly disfavored ECE. In terms of both Ideas and Issue Characteristics, distance-learning methodologies were seen as particularly ill-suited to ECE-age children. These perceptions were based on both their shorter attention spans and limited ability to use the technology, and their developmental needs which favor more social and play-based learning environments. At the same time, the perception of young children's lower capacity for compliance with masking and social distancing requirements reduced prioritization of ECE in the return to school. In all countries, ECE suffered from competition for government attention with the levels of education preparing for high-stakes examinations.

The sheer urgency of the crisis also weakened several factors which previously had helped prioritize ECE. The promotion of global norms around ECE took many years of painstaking research and dialogue, which simply was not possible on the timeline of pandemic response. Previous household surveys on access to technology and, in some cases, rapid phone surveys provided indicators on the severity of the issue, but these were quite limited compared to the availability and richness of data in normal times. The COVID pandemic crowded out potential focusing events around ECE, as events were cancelled or repurposed to focus on the crisis itself. The fragmentation of policy communities increased as many ECE donors and civil society organizations responded to the pandemic autonomously rather than as a cohesive force. There was also little time for policy entrepreneurs to emerge.

To the extent that there were mitigating factors supporting prioritization of ECE, these were more country-specific. Liberia's response to COVID-19 clearly benefited from its relatively recent

experience with distance delivery and school reopening following the 2014-15 Ebola outbreak. During this last lengthy period of school closures, the government and development partners developed ECE radio content as well as some limited strategies for improving access. This experience equipped Liberia with ready-made resources which Ethiopia, another low-income country, did not have. Relative to the other focus countries, Jamaica has a more developed ECD/ECE system generally, and the presence of a strong guiding institution with coordinating authority was an important enabling factor. The presence of the Early Childhood Commission seems to have protected ECE from forces that might favor deprioritization, such as Ministries' focus on technology-driven interventions and high-stakes examinations. Although even in Jamaica the response included more autonomous than coordinated action by development partners and civil society, the ECC was an important channel connecting parents and schools to various services and initiatives.

These findings help explain why, according to both our data and the global survey of Ministries of Education, countries were less likely to provide distance learning options for ECE and also less likely to have a plan for nationwide reopening of preschools. The impact of the pandemic on COVID-19 could be seen as another example of the "Matthew effect" (Merton, 1968). In conditions of crisis the political position of ECE, already weak relative to other levels of education and other government priorities, has deteriorated further. The COVID-19 shock could have opened a "policy window" for dramatic change in favor of ECE in our focus countries, if only it was positioned well to take advantage of this opportunity. Our analysis calls attention to the persistent neglect of early learning which undermines earlier investments by governments and development partners in expanding ECE access and quality.

There are two main implications of our study for prioritization of ECE during the ongoing crisis and its aftermath. First, our analysis of country responses during the pandemic underlines the need to strengthen prioritization of ECE when times are better. For example, as the health and economic situation improves, civil society organizations can help mobilize the policy community for young children to advocate for more national attention to ECE. As countries increasingly mainstream ECE into their education systems, donors should align their priorities and financing accordingly. Second, it is important to learn from the pandemic experience so that countries are better prepared for future crises. Early childhood specialists within Ministries of Education need a seat at the table in developing emergency preparedness plans so that these documents include more attention to young children. Tracking of early development learning indicators upon children's return to school will raise awareness of the impact of school closures. Similarly, collecting and disseminating data on the reach and effectiveness of various distance learning modalities for young children will help ensure that the absence of effective, feasible interventions is not an excuse for inaction. As countries build the resilience of their education systems, the extent to which they include ECE in these efforts will determine whether early learning opportunities will be protected in future shocks or the next crisis will further erode the progress of the past decade.

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