



PART 1:

# Framework for Quality Early Childhood Education Intervention

Author: Tadesse, S. (2021). *Catholic Relief Services framework for quality early childhood education intervention*. Education, Program Impact and Quality Assurance (PIQA), Catholic Relief Services.

Cover photo: Sok Chen, age 5, cannot speak and requires assistance with mobility, eating and personal care. His mother Kem Nov did not think he could attend preschool, but through CRS support via private funds, his school made modifications so he could attend for part of each day. Photo by Hardy, Jennifer/ CRS.

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# From CRS Education Unit

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*August, 2021*

The quality of nutrition, health and education that children receive in their early years can have a long-lasting effect on their brain development, future school performance and overall well-being. Research has shown that 85% of a child's brain development occurs during the first five years of life. Around the world, many children do not have access to the care they need in these first crucial years of development. It is estimated that nearly 80% of children living in low-income countries miss out on early childhood education opportunities (UNICEF, 2019). This situation has been exacerbated as a result of COVID-19, as many centers and programs have had to suspend or even close their operations.

High-quality, holistic early childhood development (ECD) is a core component to reaching SDG 4: Ensuring lifelong learning and quality education. ECD also contributes to other SDGs including poverty eradication (1), improving nutrition and health (2/3), achieving gender equality (5), reducing inequality (10), and promoting peace and justice (16). Lifelong learning—and the importance of building strong foundations for children—is at the heart of Catholic Relief Services' Global Education Conceptual Framework [(see p. 1)]. This framework recognizes that for all children to learn and thrive, they must be healthy, safe, engaged, supported and resilient as they grow and develop. CRS' ECD work—currently in 14 countries reaching over 1.3 million children and family members—includes early childhood education (ECE) as a key strategy to support children holistically in physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, moral and spiritual development.

This document presents CRS' framework for quality ECE. It recognizes that for all children to enter primary school healthy, ready to learn and succeed, families, communities, ECE staff and all stakeholders need to build supportive relationships; offer stimulating, inclusive and caring environments at home and in the ECE center; and provide opportunities for all children to learn framed by responsive pedagogical practices, a play-oriented, developmentally- and culturally-appropriate curriculum, and family and community support for transitions and readiness in ECE.

The framework presented in this document focuses on children ages 3 to 5—aligning with, and bridging between, CRS' ECD Framework (ages 0-3) and the early primary level. It provides evidence on the impact of ECE and core ECE principles/philosophies that guide the theory of change (TOC) and the conceptual model of this framework, which is represented and described by a set of building blocks—integral components that work together to address the development and learning needs of children from diverse backgrounds. It also presents key example interventions with related activities and resources that can be used to support parents, communities, ECE staff and all stakeholders to strengthen ECE programming. CRS ECE projects around the world have been included as examples of how these building blocks and interventions have been contextualized in specific country contexts. Finally, this document includes a literature review, with additional resources.

While this framework is informed by literature, it is not intended to be prescriptive but rather to describe core ideas, approaches and interventions. CRS programs are expected to contextualize these concepts to meet national standards as well as local needs. ECE is a strategic priority within CRS' education sector, and we hope that this document will be useful to CRS and partner staff around the world as they work to help all children learn and thrive.



# Acknowledgments

The CRS Education Team appreciates everyone who supported the development of the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Framework for Quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) Intervention. This framework represents the collaborative work and valuable reviews of Catholic Relief Services' core education team and technical reviewers, who provide support to early childhood development and education programs globally. Special thanks are given to the lead technical advisory and review team for their thorough review, comments, inputs and suggestions, which enhanced the quality of this framework. Special thanks are also given to the CRS country programs in Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Egypt, Lesotho, and Laos for the contribution of their country-specific practices in ECE programming, which we hope will provide the user of this framework with some context on the characteristics of an ECE program and how CRS addresses the early learning needs of young children from diverse backgrounds. Many thanks also goes to CRS' MarCom team for facilitating the publication of this framework.

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A photograph of two young girls playing on a playground structure. The girl in the foreground is smiling broadly, wearing a white dress with a pink polka-dot collar and a large pink flower on the skirt. She is holding onto a green rope. The girl behind her is also smiling and holding onto the same rope. The background shows a paved area with a pattern of grey and yellow tiles, and a green wall with a mural of a landscape.

Play enhances children's joy, development and learning - A young girl and her new friend play at the playground inside the Scalabrini Mission, a partner of CRS in Ecuador supporting children's healthy development and education. Photo by Simmons, Ryla, 2016



## PART I:

# Framework for Quality Early Childhood Education Intervention

## BACKGROUND

### THE CONTEXT FOR DEVELOPING CRS' FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY ECE INTERVENTION

The context for developing the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Framework For Quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) Intervention is based on the idea that standard care and education for young children should build and support a continuum of services from birth through third grade (ages 0–8 years). Currently, CRS' Early Childhood Development (ECD) programming is managed through the health and education sectors, and both sectors' conceptual models for global ECD programming cover the life cycle (ages 0–8) approach to early childhood development and learning. In terms of intervention, CRS' health sector, through its [Integrated Early Childhood Development \(ECD\) Framework](#), mostly focuses on the 0–2 age group, while the education sector, through its [CRS' Global Education Conceptual Framework](#), focuses on the learning continuum from infancy and toddlerhood (ages 0–2), preschool/preprimary (ages 3–5 or 3–6<sup>1</sup>), kindergarten (ages 6–7), early primary (ages 7–8) to young adults (ages 18+).

This ECE framework focuses on learners within the preprimary age range of 3–5 and complements CRS' integrated ECD programming for children in their first 1,000 days (ages 0–2). This means that starting at age 3, the framework focuses on preschool/preprimary age children whose developmental needs now include a heightened focus on school readiness, in addition to a continued focus on other essential needs of young children such as responsive caregiving, health, nutrition and protection.

Therefore, this ECE framework is intended to facilitate efficiency in CRS' education programming by securing gains made through investments during the first 1,000 days (prenatal through ages 0–2), and ensuring continuity of quality ECE program for the preprimary age group starting from age 3 until the child enters first grade, often around age 5 (in some cases around age 6<sup>2</sup>) with a goal: All children enter primary school healthy, and ready to learn and succeed. Children ages 3–5 are referred to

<sup>1</sup> Ages 3–6: the conventional age range for preprimary education (ECE) is ages 3–5, and for kindergarten is age 6. But in some countries, the structure for kindergarten (K) schooling might or might not exist. Therefore, in the absence of K structure, preprimary education could include age 6 as well. Also, children have birthdays throughout the year and, therefore, the preprimary age range could not be exact.

<sup>2</sup> In some countries, the eligibility for entering primary school could be age 5 or age 6, depending on child context and/or education policy. Therefore, this ECE Framework uses age 5 or age 6 for eligibility for school readiness programs.

as “young children” and, depending on the context of a country or program, the intervention or service for this age group is interchangeably referred to as preprimary, preschool, early childhood education, early childhood care and education, or school readiness program. This framework uses the term preprimary or ECE.







## FRAMEWORK AUDIENCE

This framework is intended for internal use by Catholic Relief Services program staff who support partners working in the field of ECE. It provides them with valuable information and resources consistent with internationally accepted quality standards for ECE, which the user can leverage for proposal preparation and/or designing, implementing and evaluating quality ECE programs for children ages 3–5.

## WHAT THE FRAMEWORK COVERS

This framework was developed based on a review of literature relevant to ECE and has four parts. **Part 1** is the framework itself and is divided into two chapters. The first chapter outlines the purpose and objective of the framework and provides a brief overview of what ECE means, and its benefits. The second chapter describes the framework’s guiding principles and establishes a conceptual model for ECE that is drawn from key early childhood growth, development, learning theories and 11 internationally validated evidence-based standards. These standards are referred throughout the document as **Building Blocks (BB)** for quality ECE services. They are color-coded to help the user easily differentiate between each of them. The BBs should underlie all of CRS’ efforts to improve young children’s development and learning in the preprimary stage of their development.

**Part 2** is the third chapter and is an intervention guide that provides examples of strategies, activities and resources for quality ECE interventions at four ecological systems of the child: 1) Household, 2) Facility (ECE settings), 3) Community and 4) Government institutions. Informed by evidence-based literature, the guide contains six sections:

 <b>Section 1.</b> Intervention Platform: Family (Household)	 <b>Section 4.</b> Intervention Platform: Institution (Government body - ECE Sector and others hosting ECE)
 <b>Section 2.</b> Intervention Platform: Facility (ECD program, e. g., ECE Center)	 <b>Section 5.</b> Monitoring and Evaluation
 <b>Section 3.</b> Intervention Platform: Community (Faith leaders, Local leaders, Community groups or Councils)	 <b>Section 6.</b> Cross-cutting elements in ECE by early education in emergencies, gender, disability, protection, minority language, and technology.

Using the color-coding mechanism described, Chapter 3 also shows how program teams and partners can broadly match each BB with the example ECE intervention strategies presented in the intervention guide matrix.

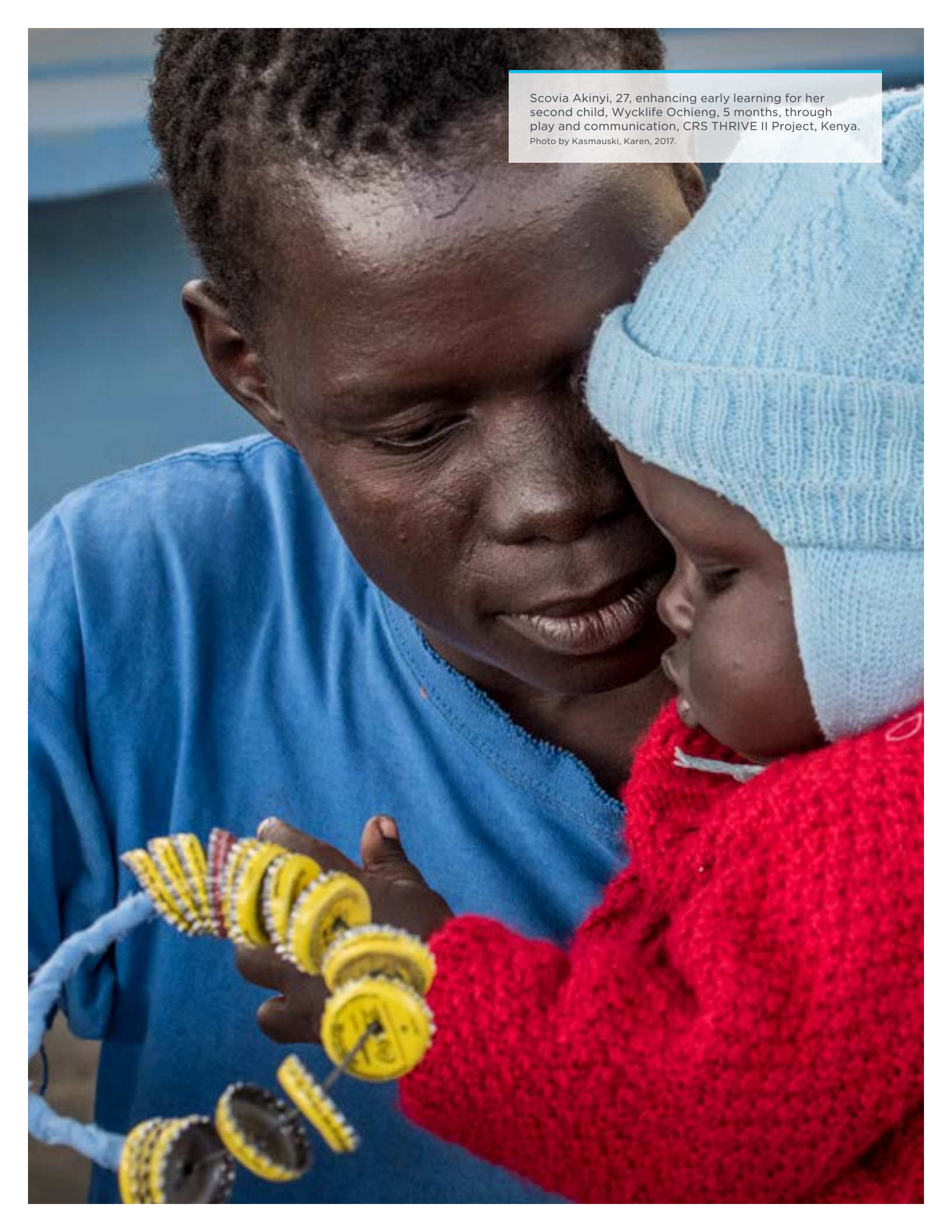
**Part 3** is the fourth chapter with Spotlights providing examples of ECE intervention from CRS country programs - Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Egypt, Lesotho, and Laos. The Spotlights are meant to provide some context to the concept of ECE intervention and how CRS is addressing the ECE needs of young boys and girls from diverse backgrounds.

**Part 4** of this framework is the **Annex**—a background literature review on ECE, which informed the development of the entire framework document. For each chapter, a bibliography with associated web-linked resources and tools is presented at the end of the document.

### WHAT THE FRAMEWORK DOESN'T COVER

**This framework does not cover the early childhood age range once children begin first grade (approximately ages 6–8).** However, it is important to be mindful that children enrolled in first to second grade belong to the early childhood range and are still within the concrete operational stage of thinking. Therefore, as preprimary school age children advance into formal school structures, it is critical to meet the learning needs of this age group with an effective transition plan and developmentally appropriate learning instructions, materials and environments.

While informed by literature, this framework is not intended to be comprehensive. It is intended to highlight key ideas in the field of ECE. Programs are expected to contextualize the concepts, approaches, principles and standards of this framework to meet national standard expectations as well as the needs of children, their families, the specific setting, the culture and the local community. The framework as such is not a prescriptive model; rather, it is a live document to be continually reviewed and updated as new evidence emerges. For example, as CRS program teams and partners adopt this framework, CRS expects cases of best practices would be documented and that lessons learned from the documentation would help strengthen this framework.



Scovia Akinyi, 27, enhancing early learning for her second child, Wycklife Ochieng, 5 months, through play and communication, CRS THRIVE II Project, Kenya.  
Photo by Kasmauski, Karen, 2017.



## PART 1, CHAPTER 1:

# Introduction

### PURPOSE

Early childhood education/ECE<sup>1</sup> is an essential component of early childhood care and development from 0–8 years of age classified as infancy and toddlerhood (ages 0–2), preschool-age (ages 3–5) and early primary (ages 6–8). The purpose of this framework is to enhance the quality of CRS’ global education programming with a particular focus on quality ECE interventions for young children, specifically within the preprimary years of ages 3–5, based on their unique needs—which are different from children ages 0–2 or 6–8 (Wittmer, Petersen, & Puckett, 2013).

### OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this framework is to support CRS program staff with the process of helping partners ensure quality ECE programs for young children by:

- facilitating a holistic early childhood intervention across the development and learning continuum.
- making and implementing relevant choices on how to best invest in ECE programs at the preprimary level in the context of their country’s socioeconomic and cultural situations.

### EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION OVERVIEW

Early childhood is a period from birth to age 8, marked by rapid growth and the development of the child’s brain by up to 90% by age 5. ECE is an integral component of optimal early childhood development—the flourishing of the whole child throughout the early childhood period in cognitive, language, social, emotional, moral and spiritual domains. To develop holistically, children need loving and caring adults and an environment that fully supports their essential needs for health, nutrition, social protection, responsive caregiving and early learning (Lancet, 2017). Early childhood education is one component of a holistic early childhood intervention. Through organized structures and programs, ECE addresses the learning and developmental needs of children in the preprimary years, or ages 3–5. Through a loving, safe, caring and stimulating environment, ECE provides all young boys and girls the opportunity to enter school ready to learn and succeed (Center on the Developing Child, n.d.; Huebner, Boothby, and Aber, *et.al.*, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> In this framework, the term ECE refers to a program that supports the early education of children ages 3–5. The term ECE is also interchangeably referred to as preprimary, preschool or school readiness program.





Students reading outdoors in Nakanong School, Phine district, Savannakhet province, Laos. USDA Food for Education and CRS Program 2019. Photo by Thevongsa, Phoonsab.

*If children are to reach their full potential, early childhood caregivers and educators (at home and in preprimary learning centers) must be responsive and attend to the holistic development of all children.*

The worldwide preprimary enrollment rate is increasing. Unfortunately, due to multiple barriers, too many children around the world still lack access to early learning opportunities. Poverty and its associated risk factors (lack of adequate income, health care, nutrition and access to education), maternal levels of education, gender, disability, geographical location, ethnicity, health status, conflict and natural disasters account for the inequity in—and exclusion from—enrollment. For example, in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) 250 million children under age 5 are at risk of not reaching their potential because of poverty and stunted growth. Stunting is an indication of impaired growth and development and is closely associated with suboptimal later life outcomes including life expectancy, income and education attainment. Globally, more than 175 million children (nearly 40% of all preschool-age children, ages 3–5) lack access to preprimary education (UNICEF, 2019), while in low-income countries such as Sub Saharan Africa 80% of preschool-age children are not enrolled in preprimary education (World Bank Group, 2016). Children with disabilities are especially vulnerable (Global Partnership for Education (GPE), 2018; Hayes, Turnbull, & Moran, 2018). Lack of understanding about their needs, lack of skilled teachers, adaptive indoor/outdoor learning resources and facilities and social stigmatization are among many factors that account for their exclusion (GPE, 2018; UNICEF, 2019).

If children are to reach their full potential, early childhood caregivers and educators (at home and in preprimary learning centers) must be responsive and attend to the holistic development of *all* children. Early childhood education that addresses the health, nutrition, education and protection needs of children provides opportunities

for healthy brain development, which affects their well-being, including lifelong learning and future sustained income. Responsive ECE or preprimary education programs not only address the needs of all children, but also ensure that they grow up, develop, learn and thrive in an inclusive community (Huebner, Boothby, and Aber, et.al., 2016; World Bank, 2021).

### WHAT IS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

ECE is an integral component of early childhood development targeted for girls and boys ages 3–5. It is a program that supports young children’s early learning and development, including children with special developmental and learning needs. The ECE program is referred to by different names: preschool, creche, daycare, nursery school, ECD center, early education, prekindergarten. Regardless of the name, the goal of ECE is to ensure that young children realize their full potential by setting a strong foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. ECE also prepares young children for their transition into elementary school by nurturing the key dimensions of child development and learning: physical well-being; motor development; social-emotional development; cognitive-language development, including literacy and numeracy; spiritual and moral development (Nye, 2006) and approaches to learning (National Education Goal Panel, n.d.; UNICEF, 2014).

An ECE program is an organized service for young girls and boys from age 3 to the start of first grade.<sup>1</sup> It can be provided in a full- or partial-day group program in a center, school, child-friendly space or home. The service is usually provided by private, public, faith-based or community-based programs, such as accelerated readiness programs. Depending on the goal of an ECE program, the duration of enrollment could be for less than a year, or for one, two or three years—at least a one-year participation rate in organized learning before entering primary grade is recommended (UNICEF, 2019).

Quality ECE program use trained teachers/facilitators and aim to provide a strong foundation by enhancing and strengthening the home learning environment and providing a diverse range of learning experiences supportive of children’s learning across all developmental domains (USAID, 2018). Early childhood teachers apply a structured program, with a developmentally appropriate curriculum that guides, enriches and supports the learning and development needs of all children in a safe environment. Early childhood teachers provide opportunities for relationships with peers and teachers, including families. This interaction allows children to build and improve their use of language and prosocial behavior, and develop logic and reasoning skills. Children are also introduced to early literacy and numeracy and encouraged to explore their world and environment. Supervised gross motor activities, such as physical exercise through games and other activities, and structured group and individual play-based activities are used to promote social interactions with peers and to develop skills, independence and school readiness.

<sup>1</sup> The age for entry into primary is determined by the theoretical age and/or national policies and standards for entry into primary education. Under the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 0, preprimary education programs are intentionally designed to include educational content for children aged 3 years up to the start of primary education, often around age 5 or age 6.

Programs that integrate nutrition, health care and education have a positive impact on cognitive outcomes. Daily snacks and meals with basic water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) support and referrals are also part of a quality ECE program (International Standard Classification of Education/ISCED/UNESCO (2011). The ECE program can also support early health and developmental delay screening efforts to identify boys and girls with disabilities, and offers them the supports they need to participate and thrive alongside their peers without disabilities (UNICEF, 2014).

**While ECE is provided through a formally organized plan and service, it is important to be mindful that children also learn through their experiences at home and in the community. This is critical to supporting young children, especially those from disadvantaged families who might not be able to participate in formal ECE programs yet enter primary school with limited foundational learning and psychosocial skills.** Capacity building of families through parenting education and household economic strengthening such as cash transfers allows families to consistently support their children's development and learning (Engle, Fernald, Alderman, *et.al.*, 2011.; Sanabria-Hernandez, 2007-2008).

### THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The benefits of investing in ECE are many. Quality ECE helps young children build a greater capacity to learn and become productive members of society and narrows early achievement gaps for children who are disadvantaged or marginalized because of poverty, gender or disabilities (Heckman, 2020 & 2021; Bourne, Grant-Lewis, Naidoo, & Jenkins, (2019). Children from low- and high-income countries who receive quality early childhood care and education services gain benefits including higher intelligence scores and school enrollment, lower dropout rates and reduced delinquency and crime (Heckman, 2020 & 2021; Barnett, 2008). They also benefit from “higher intelligence scores, higher and timelier school enrollment, less grade repetition and lower dropout rates, higher school completion rates, improved nutrition and health status, improved social and emotional behavior, improved parent-child relationships, and increased earning potential and economic self-sufficiency as an adult.” (OVCSupport.Org. 2016). ECE is even more significant for low-income children. Vulnerable families are less likely to be aware of the importance of early stimulation and may not be providing these opportunities to their children. When low-income children have quality ECE just like their privileged counterparts, they are more likely to enter primary grades with a strong foundation.

ECE programs have positive effects on maternal education, labor force participation and parental income. Mothers whose children are enrolled in preschool can more easily participate in the workforce and increase their incomes. For every dollar spent on high-quality ECE programs, especially for disadvantaged children, the annual return on investment is as high as 13% (Heckman, 2021).

To help young children have increased access to quality early learning experiences, supports and investments for ECE need to focus on key enabling factors, such as the following (UNICEF, 2019; ACEI, 2011; Center for the Developing Child, n.d.; Engle, Fernald, Alderman, *et.al.*, 2011; NAEYC, n.d. Malik, Mahesri, Geddes, &

Quintela, n.d.; UNESCO, International Institute for Educational Planning, Global Partnership for Education (GPE) & UNICEF (2019):

- Instituting ECE within national education systems through early learning standards/frameworks for inclusive curriculum, teaching method, learning environment; workforce training/pay/mentorship.
- Quality rating systems that are inclusive. Quality teaching rating items would include teacher-child/child-to-child interactions and child engagement in play-based learning. Physical space rating items would include basic sanitation, safe and nutritious food, potable water and adequate ventilation, and ensuring the environment and physical space are free from hazards, adapted to children's diverse needs ([ACEI GGA, 2011](#)).
- Integrated provisions in ECD/ECE, health, nutrition, WASH and protection.
- Parental and caregiver education on all children's health and nutrition, and early learning and safety needs.
- Household economic strengthening, such as conditional cash transfer and SILC groups with [COFE](#) (Child-Optimized Financial Education), to support the health, nutrition and education needs of all children.
- Capacity building of early-learning programs, including adaptive physical space, group size, developmentally and culturally appropriate play-based curriculum and instruction, learning assessments, and partnerships with all families and communities.



A close-up photograph of a nun and a young boy sitting at a wooden table outdoors. The nun, on the left, is wearing a light-colored habit and is leaning over the table, looking down at a drawing. The boy, on the right, is wearing a blue and white striped shirt and is holding a yellow crayon, looking intently at the drawing. They are both focused on their work. The drawing on the table is on a piece of white paper and features several colorful shapes: a green circle, a blue circle, a red circle, and a yellow circle. There are also some lines and dots drawn on the paper. The background shows a wooden building and some greenery.

Local partners to Catholic Relief Services Sr. Rose Nancy (Franciscan Sisters of St. Anne, Kenya) at the home of Grandmother Anastasia, 66, supporting Griffin's learning through drawing and coloring activity. Photo by Goodwin, Georgina.



## PART 1, CHAPTER 2:

# Guiding Principles and Conceptual Framework for Early Childhood Education

### GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Grounded in early childhood research and practice (Heckman, 2020 & 2021; The Lancet; LEGO Foundation, 2018; ACEI, 2011; NAEYC, n.d.; UNICEF, 2019; Center for the Developing Child, n.d.; Cohen & Wiata-Stupiansky, 2017; Charlesworth, 2012; PreschoolTeacher.Org), the following seven principles/philosophies guide this framework for ECE.

1. **Children develop and learn best when they are valued and nurtured by caring adults in a nondiscriminatory, safe environment.** Children look, think and act differently than adults. Young children's developmental and learning needs are

met only when they are educated and cared for in a nondiscriminatory way. This means all young children are treated the same regardless of their language, culture, ethnicity, age, gender, SES, family status, disabilities or special needs. Their home and ECE environments must also be safe and secure so they feel free to interact with things and people, and become active learners.

2. **All children can learn, and learning is enhanced by multiple approaches and developmentally appropriate practice** (Box 1). Young children exhibit individual characteristics, behaviors, abilities and ways of learning (kinesthetic, visual, auditory and tactile) including different cultural, linguistic and religious background. With the right support and environment, boys and girls—including children with disabilities (CWD)—can realize their full potential. Children need multiple teaching approaches (e.g., [Universal Design for Learning Guideline](#)) and experiences. Caregivers and early childhood educators should seek to optimize children's growth, development and learning according to the child's context and specific development and learning needs

#### BOX 1

#### DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE (DAP)

Instruction that promotes children's optimal learning and development across all developmental domains. Teachers understand how children develop and use this knowledge to provide varied learning experiences that are at the developmental stage of each child (individually and as a group). Learning experiences include a mix of adult-initiated and child-initiated activities, build on what children already know and do, emphasize learning by doing and through play, and utilize a variety of teaching and learning materials.

[USAID \(2018\). Getting early grade reading right: A case for investing in quality Early Childhood Education programs](#)

[NAEYC \(2020\). DAP Position Statement.   
https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents](#)

*Play enhances  
children's  
development and  
learning.*

1. **Young children grow, develop and learn when their essential needs are met.** The essential needs of all children include health, nutrition, education and protection. Children who are hungry and frightened cannot be attentive. Their thinking ability is dependent upon healthy brain function and physical well-being. Meeting the essential needs of all children holistically as appropriate to their developmental stage and capabilities improves their chances of developing to their full potential.
2. **Play enhances children's development and learning.** Play provides all children, including CWD, the opportunity to learn through hands-on, enjoyable and fun activities. Children build and enrich early numeracy and literacy skills, interpersonal skills and physical/motor skills as they engage in various forms of play, and songs and games with rules. Play, therefore, needs to be an integral component of ECE pedagogy, activities and programs. Play should also be adapted to the needs of children with disabilities, children in conflict, children in residential care and children with HIV/AIDS.
3. **Families are the first and most important teachers.** Families are the first and immediate point of personal and social contact for children. The family's culture, belief system and child-rearing practices influence who the child is and who he/she becomes. Successful ECE programs work with families of all children

#### BOX 2

##### DEVELOPMENTAL DOMAINS

Refers to the different areas of child development including, among others, learning how to use the big and small muscles in the body; learning how to relate to, play with and talk to others; learning how to express feelings; learning how to process and use information; and learning how to perceive, understand and use language.

[From USAID \(2018\). \*Getting early grade reading right: A case for investing in quality Early Childhood Education programs\*.](#)

throughout the child's education, with an awareness that children with disabilities require special support and learn best in their home language.

4. **Young children become successful learners when services promote the development of the whole child, with continual support for learning.** Children develop at their own pace, and development occurs simultaneously in multiple **developmental domains** (Box 2) including physical-motor, cognitive-language, socioemotional and spiritual-moral. The best early childhood intervention is one that addresses the whole child, encompassing as many domains as possible, while concurrently addressing the health, nutrition and safety needs of all children. Children learn in a cumulative manner, utilizing their early competencies for later achievements over time. For this reason, transition planning across the developmental continuum and different learning settings benefit all children.
5. **Young children thrive when they receive quality and coordinated support from multiple child care providers, structures and systems.** Children's development and learning is influenced by their environment—their families, schools, communities and national systems. When families, communities, and schools are strong, children thrive. Families, schools, and communities grow even stronger when they are supported by a strong national system that ensures the quality of a child's education, health, protection and nutrition. Programs that support children must provide services that are contextualized, supportive and holistic.

## CRS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THEORY OF CHANGE FOR QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) INTERVENTION

### Background for CRS' Conceptual Framework for Quality ECE

This ECE framework aligns with [CRS' Global Education Conceptual Framework](#), which promotes improved opportunities for learning through the *Bio-ecological or Systems approach* (Box 3) whereby, *across the learning continuum (ages, 0-18+ years), **all** learners are healthy, safe, engaged, supported and resilient through coordinated direct and indirect care and support from the learners' environments—family, school, community and national systems.*

#### BOX 3

The Bio-ecological or Systems approach shows that children's development is influenced by the environment in which they live. Different environmental levels directly or indirectly influence a child's development: the child's family, community, and social and cultural context. The interaction between and among these levels impact and shape the child's life. The child, in turn, actively influences family members, teachers and peers based on his or her physical appearance, developmental abilities, temperaments, intellectual skills and behavior.

To meet the child's needs holistically, adults need to pay attention to all the systems of influence, especially family life and support for families in a society. The application of this approach is effective when programs adapt its concepts into their local contexts. (Lynn & Wiata-Stupiansky, 2017; Wittmer & Puckett, 2013; Charlesworth, 2012)

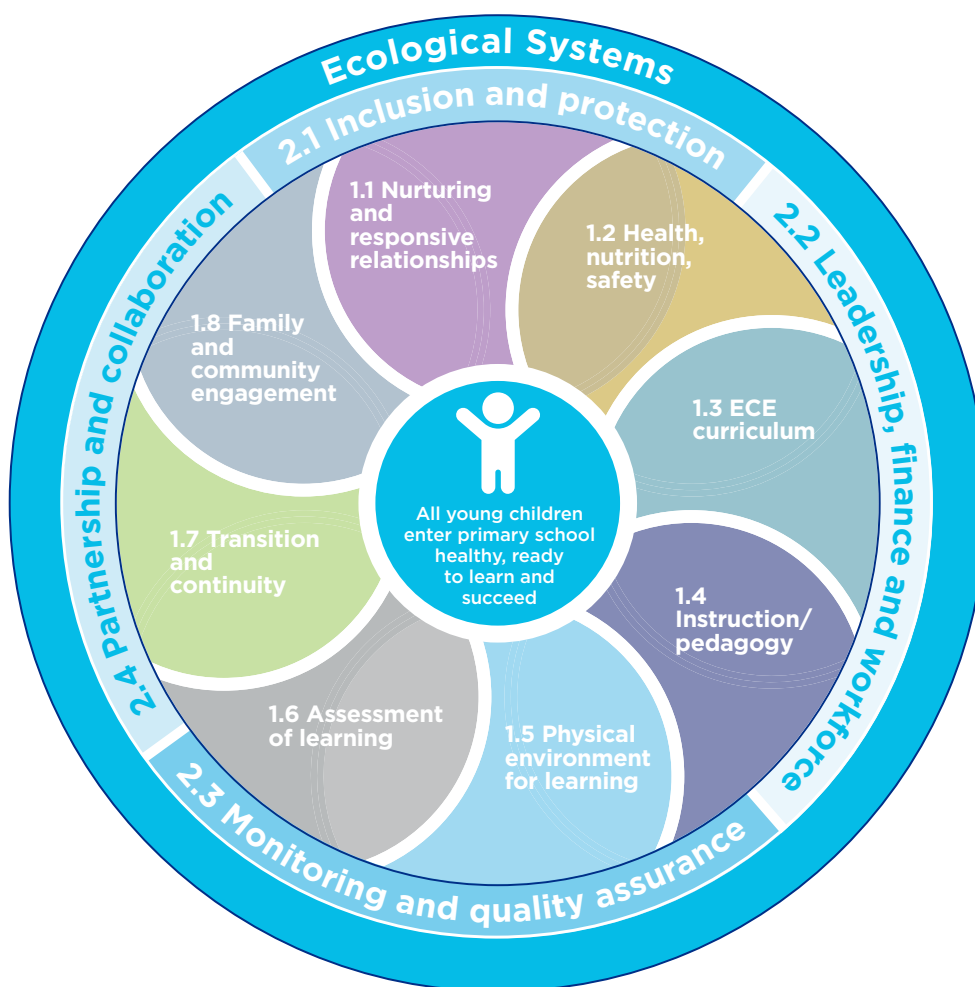
While the learning continuum in CRS' education programming covers the life cycle or sequential phases of development—infancy and toddlerhood (ages 0–2), preschool/preprimary (ages 3–5), kindergarten (ages 6–7), early primary (ages 7–8) up to young adult (age 18+), **this ECE framework focuses on learners within the preprimary age range of ages 3–5** and its purpose is to promote quality ECE programs for this age group with a **goal: All young children<sup>1</sup> enter primary school healthy, and ready to learn and succeed.**

<sup>1</sup> The term “All young children” includes boys and girls belonging to one or more of the following: children with developmental delays and disabilities, children affected/infected by HIV/AIDS, children of minority language, children in emergencies, children living in rural, hard-to-reach areas, children in poverty and children living in residential care.

## CRS' CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION INTERVENTION

The conceptual framework and the theory of change (TOC) of this framework represent the key Building Blocks of a quality early childhood education intervention which, if implemented effectively through the support of the child's ecological systems - families, schools, communities, and national institutions -, help ensure that **all young children enter primary school healthy, ready to learn and succeed.**

Figure 2. CRS Conceptual Framework for Quality ECE Intervention



Source: Adapted from NAEYC, n.d.; ACEI 2011; UNICEF 2019; UNESCO 2018; UNESCO, UNICEF, & Brookings Institution and the World Bank, 2017; Anderson, Kosaraju, Raikes, & Solana, 2017



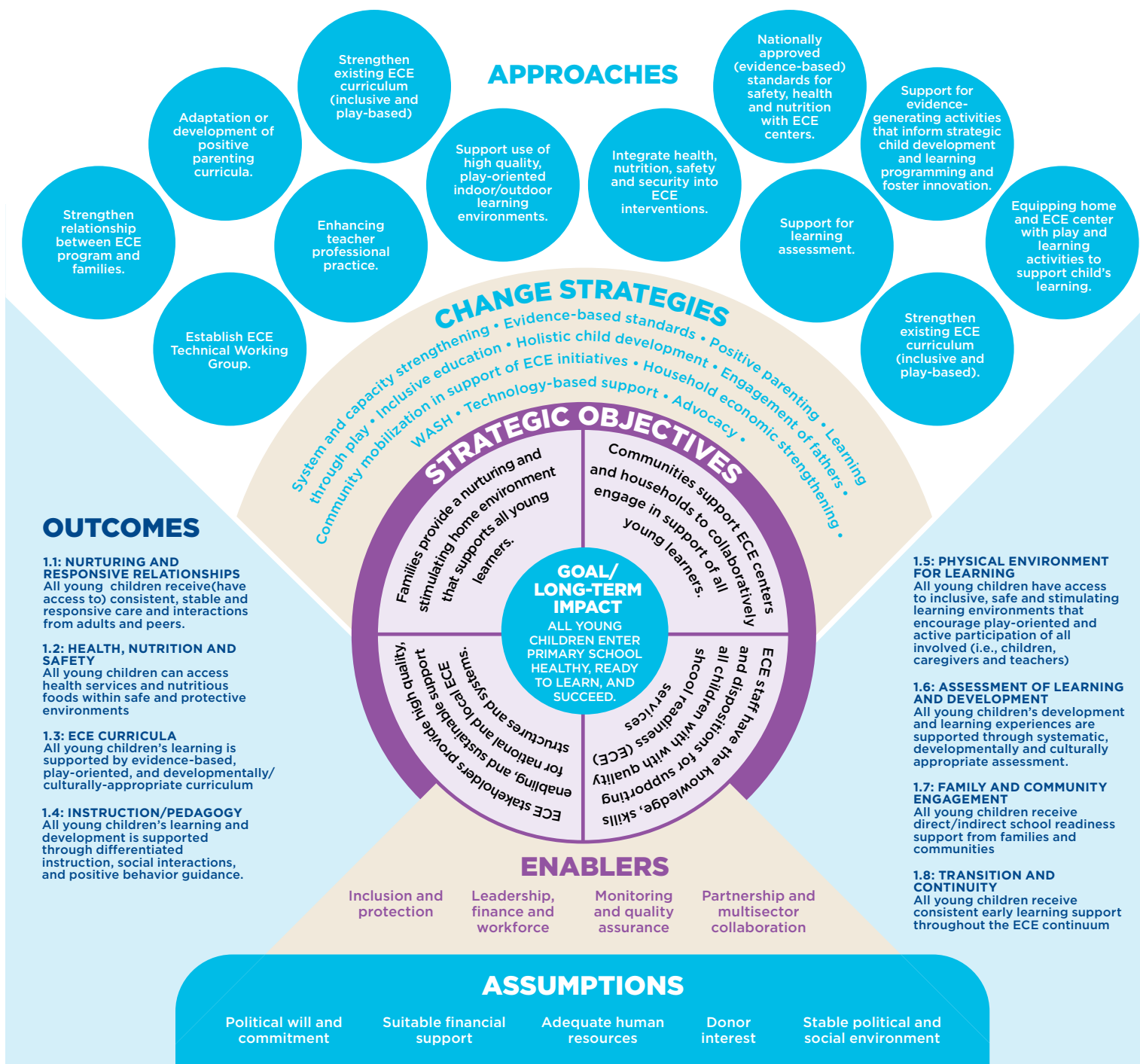
Joseph Andrise, 29, a teacher from Notre Dame de Lamerici de Robillard school, in Nord Department, Haiti, says: “Education is the foundation of everything,” -she is reading the workbook of “Haiti Reads” program with her first grade students, CRS Rice Bowl, Education Program. Photo by: Leiva/Silverlight, Oscar

**The theory of change** reflects all contributions of the key actors in ECE—family, community, ECE staff and ECE stakeholders—for delivery of results in a set of interrelated Building Blocks which, when applied together, yield quality outcomes for **all** young children. Supporting delivery on outcomes and change strategies are four enablers with interconnected elements: greater inclusion and protection, efficient workforce, finance and leadership, systematic monitoring and quality assurance, and effective partnership and multisector collaboration. The associated assumptions and approaches ensure that strategies and enablers respond more systematically to achieve the intended results. With this background, CRS’ ECE development hypothesis (TOC) is that:

***IF** ECE Staff have the knowledge, skills and dispositions for supporting all young children with quality school readiness (ECE) services, **AND, IF** Families provide a nurturing and stimulating home environment that supports all young learners, **AND, IF** Communities support ECE centers and households to collaboratively engage in support of all young learners, **AND, IF** ECE Stakeholders provide high-quality, enabling and sustainable support for national and local ECE structures and systems, **THEN**, all young children enter primary school healthy, ready to learn and succeed.*



Figure 3. CRS Theory of Change for Quality Intervention in Early Childhood Education.





Christine Chibiliti, 2 years, counts using a colorful felt abacus at an Early Child Development (ECD) space for play, learning and social interaction, Kasaba, Zambia, SCORE ECD Project. Photo by: Tsee, Dooshima.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ELEMENTS OF THE BUILDING BLOCKS

For this framework, the building blocks for quality ECE interventions are classified based on literature reviews of what constitutes a quality ECE program. The BBs are classified into two categories. BB I constitute eight components that directly influence young children's growth, development and learning in formal and informal ECE settings. It is important to give equal attention to each component of BB I, along with adequate resources, to ensure successful learning outcomes for young children.

BB II constitutes four components that catalyze the advancement of each component in BB I. Because a quality ECE program requires a strong and supportive environment, the success of the teaching-learning processes depends on successful implementation of each component in BBII. The application of the BBs/standards can be effective only when they are adapted and implemented within one's national or local context.

**BBs I and II are interconnected. Therefore, it is important to be mindful that the interactions between and among the elements of BBs I and II impact and shape the child's well-being as well as his/her readiness to learn and succeed in school and in life. BBs can be applied across various ECE programs, according to their specific goals and context. This includes, but is not limited to, full- or part-day programs in various settings such as centers, preprimary classrooms, child-friendly spaces and home/family daycares provided by private, public, faith-based and/or community-based school readiness programs (CBSR) such as the UNICEF CBSR model.**

ECE program quality can be evaluated by measuring indicators, including improved social skills, reduction of behavior problems and the promotion of reading, math and language skills. Each BB can also be measured by its own respective lower-level indicators to understand how well it is being implemented and which BBs still need strengthening. The decision on how indicators are defined depends on the goal of a certain intervention or program (UNESCO, 2015; UNESCO, UNICEF, Brookings Institution & the World Bank, 2017; Fernald, Prado, Kariger, & Raikes, 2017). For more information on ECE quality indicators, refer to the Annex section of this document.

### Description of Building Blocks

The description of the BBs below contains information about standards that should be set in an ECE program. These BBs serve as a basis for the regular monitoring of ECE provision in all ECE interventions. To monitor some aspects of quality in each standard/BB, however, program teams and partners need to adapt and administer evidence-based or nationally approved quality monitoring tools and criteria. These tools and criteria should be based on national priorities and cultural context. Some examples of ECE quality monitoring tools include Measure of Development and Early Learning (MODEL) and Measure of Early Learning Environment (MELE) (UNESCO, UNICEF, Brookings Institution & the World Bank, 2017).

### Building Blocks I

#### 1.1. Nurturing and responsive relationships

A child's development and learning is highly dependent upon, and impacted by, relationships with his or her caregivers and peers. Adults must support all children with consistent, sensitive care and interactions. To provide such care, caregivers and teachers must be in good mental and physical health. Adults must also have bias- and stigma-free attitudes and actions towards every child. Strong, positive and responsive adult-child and peer relationships create a strong foundation in the child's brain, reduces toxic stress and fosters trust and resiliency, which bolsters children's ability to learn and thrive. Children, including CWD, who experience positive and bias-free relationships with adults and peers show less undesirable behavior, follow social rules and expectations for learning, exhibit caring attitudes and can comfortably interact with peers from diverse backgrounds. They can also trust adults in times of anxiety or sadness. These social and emotional skills positively impact children's learning outcomes. Children who benefit from nurturing and responsive relationships are also more likely to become nurturing and responsive caregivers.

#### 1.2. Health, nutrition, and safety

Physical health and growth, including a child's sense of security, are essential for healthy brain development and well-being. To grow and learn, young children need nutritious and sufficient food, enough sleep and to feel happy, safe and protected at home and in ECE centers (See BB 2.1 for more information on Protection). While nutrition and health support the physical and cognitive development of a child, protection buffers anxiety and stress, facilitating a child's ability to learn and thrive.

How well these needs are met is dependent upon the well-being of caregivers and families. To foster the healthy development of children, families need to be healthy, economically strong and knowledgeable about child development and positive parenting skills. Early learning programs, at home or centers, must be equipped with knowledge, skills, resources and systems that allow them to provide daily nutritious meals to children and maintain basic health and safety protocols.

### 1.3. Early childhood education (ECE) curriculum

Evidence-based, developmentally and culturally appropriate ECE program curricula positively impacts all young children in their development and learning needs. The ECE curriculum, in conjunction with Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS)<sup>1</sup>, serves as a tool to guide teachers and caregivers in supporting the early development and education of young children, including children with disabilities. The curriculum supports responsive pedagogy and activities that are play-oriented, socially and individually engaging, adaptive/inclusive, and culturally and developmentally appropriate.

### 1.4. Instruction/pedagogy

The focus is on equipping early childhood caregivers and teachers with knowledge, skills and dispositions supported by the science of ECE. An effective ECE teacher is able to support vulnerable and disadvantaged children, engage children of varying abilities/disabilities and backgrounds, and connect with families of diverse backgrounds. He or she recognizes children's various learning styles and provides opportunities for all children to access learning through play, use of home language and varied delivery mechanisms, including technology. The teacher also ensures that children's learning skills are modified or improved through feedback, guidance, repetition and the continuous use of assessment data. Having a trained and well-prepared caregiver/teacher supports the needs of all young children with responsiveness and sensitivity, managing their behavior in caring and empathic ways rather than through harsh punishment. It also ensures that caregivers/teachers create a community of learners by providing environments where children successfully interact with their caregivers and teachers, make friends and learn. To be successful, the entire ECE system must be supportive of ECE teachers through respect, recreation, access to mental health consultations, fair wages and incentives for professional growth and development.

### 1.5. Physical environment for learning

Young children need opportunities to grow and learn in loving, inclusive, healthy, and stimulating home and school environments. Effective indoor/outdoor environments provide young children with sufficient physical space and opportunities for play,

<sup>1</sup> The ELDS are guidelines for early learning, stating expectations of what children can do and learn at a certain age and stage of their development. By using ELDS as a guide, early childhood practitioners can design developmentally appropriate learning goals with activities and lessons that support these expectations. Early year interventions also use the ELDS as a tool to measure development and learning outcomes and educate caregivers and community members about child development and how to best support children according to their individual context.

exploration, physical movement, and social and individual play/learning activities free from physical and psychological harm. They also promote developmental and learning skills for children with different abilities, including children with disabilities and developmental delays through low/no-cost adaptive learning materials and equipment suitable for all children.

#### 1.6. Assessment of learning and development

ECE programs must have a system in place to regularly assess, observe and record children's development and learning status, with considerations for the child's overall context abilities, interests, and home and school life. Having an effective assessment system in place helps teachers and caregivers evaluate learning environments and children's learning and development; document what each young child can do within his/her abilities, family values and culture; and plan timely and appropriate interventions for the child and family. Early screening and intervention help teachers provide more responsive instruction and accommodation for children with disabilities and special needs. The planning and process of assessment includes families, with primary caregivers agreeing to participate in the assessment.

#### 1.7. Family and community engagement

Young boys and girls need to be educated in a culturally appropriate manner, with respect for their values, beliefs, experiences and home language. An effective ECE program engages family and community in the development of young children. This is important because children also learn from their experiences within their family and community. Quality ECE ensures families receive information about the welfare and education of their child and are encouraged to participate in activities and platforms such as home-literacy activities, family play and story time, and as assistants at learning centers. Parents' information also helps teachers better understand how a child's home life may affect his or her classroom behavior and learning style. Families with limited social and economic resources have a difficult time fulfilling their children's needs. This is even truer for families with children with disabilities, as they need specialized approaches and resources. Establishing strong networks with the family, early learning program and community—and mobilizing and utilizing local support services and resources in the community—benefits the child and family.

#### 1.8. Transition and continuity in early development and learning

Continuity and transition greatly impact children's learning experiences because children construct later learning based on their prior knowledge and experiences. Children need consistent learning experiences and expectations in family, preschool, kindergarten and primary settings. A successful transition ensures they know in advance what to expect in new learning experiences, such as rules, teaching styles, physical environment, and the peers and teachers they will be forming relationships with. Families, schools and communities must work together to create alignment, shared understanding and complementary practices, such as take-home resources and visits with parents before the new program starts; joint exchange or training for ECE and G1 teachers; early screening, referrals and counter-referrals for children with



special needs; and continuity of teaching approaches and activities. The alignment of curriculum, standards and assessment between preprimary and primary programs helps young children adjust to their new learning environment and make positive developmental and learning progress.

Next, the four components of BB II are described. BBII components are interrelated and function as enabling environments, or catalysts, for the strong and effective planning and implementation of each component in BBI.

## Building Block II

### 2.1. Inclusion and protection

Inclusive environments ensure boys and girls will be appreciated, supported and treated with dignity. This means the rights of all young children—children with disabilities, children from ethnic-minority families, and orphans and vulnerable children—can engage in all aspects of life and educational activities within school, family and community environments. Inclusion and participation in ECE, if successfully applied, helps disadvantaged and marginalized children gain equal footing with their more-advantaged peers. For example, in an inclusive or linguistically diverse early learning environment where young children do not all speak the same first language, boys and girls learn in their home language; curriculum is bias-free; teaching strategies, learning materials, activities and equipment are adaptive to the child's needs; and families from diverse backgrounds can participate equally in children's early learning activities.

In addition, early childhood systems—policies, families, schools and communities—must protect children from all forms of abuse and exploitation. Ethical and child-right protocol per national guidelines must be in place and routinely monitored in any ECE program's plan and procedures. Some considerations include avoiding, both at home and in preprimary centers, emotional or physical maltreatment/punishment and using positive behavior guidance, allowing young children to express their thoughts and participate in psychosocial counseling, play, and learning activities without being humiliated or degraded; ensuring each child obtains a birth certificate through the school registration process; identifying risks in a child's home and school environment that could present opportunities for maltreatment and reporting concerns to the appropriate community; and helping victims of abuse according to the child's age and developmental level.

### 2.2. Leadership, finance and workforce

Effective early childhood programs operate and rely on the broader early childhood system and can only be realized if programs are high quality. Quality ECE programs can be sustained when national stakeholders put systems in place that help advance the smooth and effective delivery of ECE services. Quality ECE services will adopt nationally approved ECE curricula and non-technology and technology-based tools and guidelines, including in-service trainings, regulatory and supportive supervision, and coaching. Best-designed ECE programs benefit from partnerships with families

and communities and a high-quality early learning workforce; incentives and support mechanisms for quality recruitment/retention of teachers; ethical assessment tools; and significant program resources. A well-financed ECE system also sustains access and quality ECE programs for young children. The extent to which these factors are met at the national or program levels indicate the efficiency and effectiveness of leadership, workforce development and quality assurance in ECE.

### 2.3. Monitoring and quality assurance of ECE programs

Quality in ECE basically entails three dimensions—structural quality (e.g., group size or staff-child ratio), process quality (child-teacher/caregiver interaction, activities for children) and outcome quality (often includes children's skills and abilities, child well-being or parent satisfaction). These ECE activities are evaluated based on pre-agreed quality standards, benchmarks or indicators which are established and modified through use for results-based and adaptive management of an ECE program. Effective ECE services require a system for supervising or evaluating these aspects via a continuous and systematic collection of quantitative and qualitative data. For example, ECE quality standards should be established for child-staff ratios, the space per child, quality/quantity of feeding programs, learning materials, equipment, and curriculum, duration and/or children's learning and early development achievements, appropriate training compulsory for ECD staff/caregivers, inclusiveness, etc.

### 2.4. Partnership and collaboration

ECE is an integrated concept that cuts across multiple sectors including health and nutrition, education and social and psychological protection. Holistic and quality ECE service requires the active participation and coordinated support of all key actors in the child's life: family, educators/teachers, health providers and practitioners, and community leaders from both public and private sectors. Linkages and coordinated efforts that cut across these sectors not only have the greatest impact, but also have the potential to unite early childhood services which are often fragmented by age group or discipline. Children gain larger cognitive benefits when they receive support that combines early stimulation and nutrition rather than nutrition only or stimulation only (Schneider, Geiser, Gosoni, et.al., 2018). Further, school readiness is a function of the interaction between the child's immediate ecological systems (family, school and community). Thus, a shared decision and synergistic support from key actors within these systems highly impacts children's transitions and readiness in ECE.

## LINKAGES OF BUILDING BLOCKS TO ECE STRATEGIES

BB1 and BB2 interact and mutually strengthen each other. Therefore, knowledge and understanding of the elements of BBs and integrating their foci into ECE intervention strategies will influence the overall quality of ECE programs. Effective instructional competencies can be achieved for ECE teachers if teachers' training plans adapt or are informed by the tenets of, for example, BBs 1.3. and 1.4. Likewise, adapting the tenets of BBs 1.5 into an ECE program allows for a conducive learning and development environment where children can feel safe, stimulated, nurtured and protected. In Chapter 3 of this document, examples are provided to show how the BBs can broadly be matched with different ECE intervention strategies.



Educational play materials at an Early Child Development (ECD) space in Kasaba, SCORE-ECD project, 2020. Zambia. Photo: Tsee, Dooshima



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