TOWARD QUALITY EARLY LEARNING: SYSTEMS FOR SUCCESS

A systems' approach to scale up quality early learning

To realize the returns on Early Childhood Education (ECE) investments and promote child learning, the key elements underlying these investments must be aligned and coherent, and function within a broader framework. No matter how effective specific curricula and pedagogy, particular learning environments, or even individual educators and leaders are, individually they are insufficient to sustainably advance early learning. Adopting a systems approach to ECE investments can help ensure their efficient implementation, increase overall child learning, and support the transition from ECE to primary education. Understanding how the diverse array of system elements interact with one another is key to scaling access with quality.

Building systems to scale up quality early learning

A systemic approach to scaling up ECE can promote coherence and articulation across key elements (curriculum, pedagogy, workforce, learning environments), as well as facilitate coordination with other sectors and systems that support child learning. This systemic approach requires *defining early learning systems, holistically planning for change* and *implementing contextually sensitive systems*.

Defining early learning systems. An early learning system is comprised of two fundamental components: direct service provision, and the "infrastructure" underlying that provision—financing, governance, regulation and account¬ability, workforce capacity, data collection and use, family and community engagement, and links with other services. Each element contributes to the system as a whole functioning harmoniously. Because early learning is the bridge that links early childhood and education systems, elements of the infrastructure in both systems (such as teacher compensation, training, peda¬gogy, regulatory requirements, and measures of quality) must be aligned to maximize child learning.

Holistically planning for change. Early learning services often straddle diverse social and governmental structures. Efforts to improve early learning services tend to focus on one particular dimension (e.g., the child, the classroom, the pedagogical approach) at the cost of achieving quality early learning at scale. For example, addressing recurring workforce challenges faced by early learning programs cannot be limited to a focus on professional development opportunities; finance, governance, regulation, and accountability issues must also be considered and addressed. Understanding how such diverse system elements interact with one another is a prerequisite for the advancement and scalability of quality early learning.

Implementing contextually sensitive systems. To improve the quality of early learning services, contextual variation must be well understood.[1] In some countries, early learning services are not defined as a durable part of the social fabric, limiting their scope, reach and even duration. A systems perspective that acknowledges the underlying factors behind existing ECE service provision—or a lack thereof—is necessary to successfully design and implement quality early learning services going forward.

Steps to build systems for quality early learning

To build systems that enable quality early learning and promote child learning, policymakers should consider several steps:

Contextual awareness. Many systems can influence young children to varying degrees, including the family, education, health, welfare, neighborhood or housing, and economic and political systems. These systems tend to be supported by public policies that reinforce their insularity, and potentially hamper their ability or willingness to change. An effective systems approach to scaling up quality early learning must include an assessment of the relative impact on young children of those underlying factors.

Alignment and delivery. Systems thinking can accelerate institutional reforms, reduce challenges of transitions for children, and boost the efficiency and quality of early learning. For instance, pedagogical alignment calls for the alignment of curriculum, standards, assessments, teacher competencies, certification requirements and compensation, irrespective of the government agency responsible for the provision of early learning services.[2] Contextually grounded systems thinking can facilitate coordi¬nation across sectors and address the infrastructural elements that promote durable alignment.¬

Implementation. It is important to structure quality early learning services to suit the context, prioritize continuity among institutions and systems, and sustain capacity at the provider and leader levels. An awareness of the benefits of institutional linkages for young children should underline implementation efforts. Early learning services are based on relationships among the individuals involved in bringing them to reality, and relationships among the institutions that provide the services. Successful implementation requires paying attention to diverse relationships that predate the system planning, managing these relationships, and recognizing that diverse constituencies are a centerpiece of systems implementation. Whether smooth or marked by competition, inconsistencies of values or differing pedagogical orientations, these institutional relationships must be understood and addressed.

Assessment and improvement. There is widespread agreement on the need to assess both the implementa¬tion and outcomes associated with early learning services. From an imple¬mentation perspective, learning about successes, preferred implementation sequences or pitfalls could ease the challenge by revealing essential systemic elements. Solid data on outcomes can boost support for early learning services, just as positive program results have fueled the political will for ECE efforts.[3] Traditionally, effectiveness in early learning programs has been measured by two variables: program quality and children's outcomes. Yet the more complex, hybridized, and contextually grounded assessments of early learning services require a different set of metrics and outcomes that accrue not only to the child but also to the family, to pedagogy, and to the alignment of government systems.

A systems approach to implementing early learning services can foster quality, equitable distribution, scalability, and efficiency. Creating early learning services that are guided by systems thinking and alignment requires patience, recurrent long-term vision, support, and scholarship. Although no easy task, a systems approach is among the most pressing needs and the greatest opportunities to successfully implement and scale quality early learning services that promote child learning.

References

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