



Enhancing Africa-Led Research on Early Childhood Development and Foundation Learning Workshop: **Recommendations for Action**

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our guest presenters, Professor Amina Abubakar (Director of the Institute for Human Development at the Aga Khan University in Kenya), and Professor Ernest Kofi Davis (Provost at the Faculty of Education Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana) for the insightful presentations. Also, we thank our facilitators for their time and excellent work that led to us having very fruitful breakout sessions. Our appreciation also goes to all attendees for their time and active participation. Furthermore, we thank our funders – Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. Lastly, our profound gratitude goes to the organising teams at ESSA and the REAL Centre.

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Figure 1: Geographical spread of registrants

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1. Overview

This report summarises key recommendations from a virtual workshop organised by the not-for-profit organisation Education Sub Saharan Africa (ESSA) and the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge on 19th April 2023, focusing on the theme: *Enhancing Africa-led Research on Early Childhood Education and Foundational Learning*. The workshop brought together more than 130 education stakeholders including researchers, funders, policymakers, and practitioners from Africa and beyond to deliberate ways to enhance Early Childhood and Foundational Learning research in Africa. It provided a forum for presentations and discussions about:

- a. Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning research themes and how these relate to African policies and development agendas.
- b. Ways to enhance South-South collaboration and networking, identify and explore potential opportunities to strengthen existing Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning communities of practice.
- c. The needs and priorities of Africa-based Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning researchers and explore potential opportunities and strategies for addressing them.

This summary report builds on recommendations outlined in the detailed [report](#) from a conference organised by ESSA and the REAL Centre in June 2021, focusing on *Action on Funding for Africa-led Education Research*. In the next two sections, we highlight recommendations made by the 2023 workshop attendees, followed by a summary of the opening remarks. We then present key points from two presentations. A summary of discussion from breakout sessions will follow. Next, we present the closing remarks and outline recommendations for action. The last section focuses on next steps.

2. Highlights of recommendations

The workshop provided an opportunity for Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning stakeholders to discuss ideas to enhance research in sub-Saharan Africa.

Participants provided deeper insights in the issue of funding, especially the need for more local funding to drive local research agenda. Readers will learn more about ways to invest to better serve researchers based in sub-Saharan Africa. These include supporting graduate students to present papers at international conferences, directing calls specifically to early career and female researchers, and using funding to promote collaboration among researchers. In addition, readers will learn that mentorship of early career researchers is key to sustaining quality research in the region. These mentorship programmes should be long term and ongoing so researchers can have longer period to build their expertise and networks through the help of a mentor.

They also recommended a greater focus on context relevant research, increased collaboration among researchers in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as a reduction in teaching and management workloads to enable more time for research. It was highlighted that research in the region mostly does not align with local policy agendas, partly because funding is provided by external organisations that may have agenda that misalign with current priorities of the country. Academics in universities and colleges in Africa have more teaching and administrative workload compared with others elsewhere. These commitments reduce the time available to conduct quality research and also to prepare quality funding proposal on time.

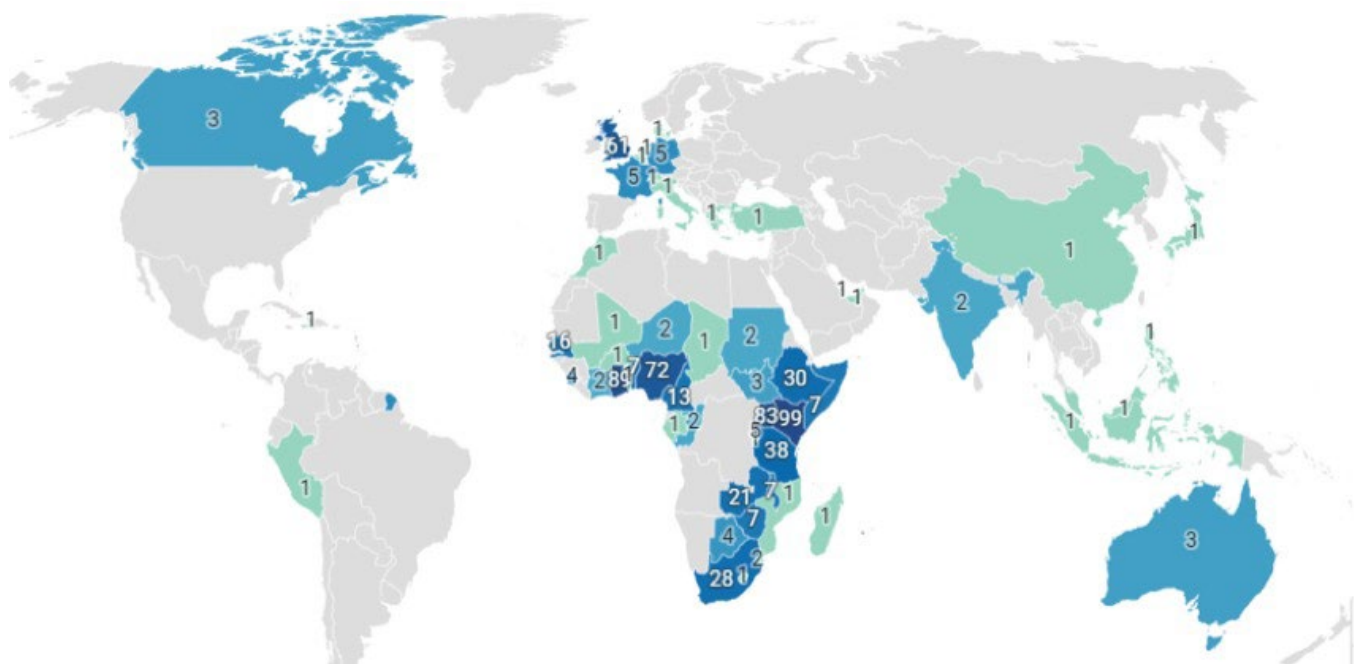


Furthermore, attendees encouraged data sharing by/among researchers, policymakers, and other data collectors. The problem of data availability and accessibility were highlighted. Where data is available, mostly it is not accessible partly because owners do not want to share, or the cost to get it in accessible manner is too high. However, making data accessible will reduce the cost of collecting fresh data and speed up research production in the region. Therefore, researchers should include the cost of processing data for easy access in research budget. Funders can also make data sharing a requirement in calls for funding. Do not miss the insightful recommendations specifically for Early Child Development and Foundational Learning stakeholders which are presented in addition to cross cutting recommendations in section 8, on page 12.

3. Overview of registrants

The workshop was publicised via social media in both English and French. The event attracted attendees worldwide, with the majority joining from Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and the United Kingdom, as indicated on the map below. The map also reflects ESSA and REAL Centre's networks, which are stronger in anglophone countries. For future events, additional efforts will need to be made to reach more attendees from francophone and Lusophone countries.

Figure 1: Geographical spread of registrants



4. Opening remarks

Dr Pauline Essah, Director of Research and Programmes at ESSA welcomed participants and spoke briefly about ESSA. She indicated that ESSA is an education not-for-profit / charity that generates and shares data and evidence from sub-Saharan Africa for decision making. In doing this, ESSA engages with a wide range of stakeholders including policymakers, researchers, educators, funders, and young people to connect them with relevant data to make decisions to improve education delivery in the region. The goal is to enhance the quality of tertiary education and to equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need to gain and/or create meaningful employment.

She also informed attendees that ESSA's partnership with the REAL Centre started in 2017 with the development of the [African Education Research Database](#) - an ongoing project aimed at raising the profile of African education researchers and their work. Providing brief information about the REAL Centre, she said the Centre, directed by Professor Pauline Rose, conducts research that has policy relevance to improve access and learning for children and young people in sub-Saharan African and beyond.

Concluding her remarks, Dr Essah stressed that the workshop was about identifying, connecting, and understanding the needs of Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning researchers in sub-Saharan Africa, in collaboration with the REAL Centre, using funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, respectively. The focus is to understand what research is being undertaken and how these researchers can be supported to enhance their work.

5. Summary of presentations

In this section, we present a summary of the presentations made by two invited African researchers.

5.1 Enhancing African-led research on Early Childhood Development

Our first speaker was Professor Amina Abubakar Ally, Director for the Institute for Human Development at Aga Khan University in Kenya. In her presentation, she discussed challenges and ways to enhance African-led research on Early Childhood Development.

Challenges

The participants highlighted key challenges as presented below.

a. Research capacity

There is generally a lack of training on Early Childhood Development assessment and measurement tools, research methods, and software for data collection and analysis (for example, 0-3 assessment, educational assessment, longitudinal approaches, and ethnographic study). According to Professor Abubakar, *'there is a lack of practical experience. The theory learnt is rarely as useful, so students need the opportunity to practice what they learn – apprenticeship model.'*

b. Lack of infrastructure

There are students who have completed degrees in Early Childhood Development but are not aware of any of the Early Childhood Development assessments, such as 0-3 assessment and relevant software to conduct data analysis, either due to the high costs of these programmes or because of the schools lacking the infrastructure.

c. Lack of funding

Due to its competitive nature, international funding is usually not accessible to a lot of Africa-based African researchers, since many of them lack grant writing skills. *'As a result of them not receiving funding, these African researchers are compelled to collaborate with others, which in turn does not allow them to obtain prominent positions in terms of authorship,'* Professor Abubakar stressed.

d. Lack of nurturing environment

There is limited dedicated research time for academics, policies, and incentives for research, as well as grant management support systems. Researchers are pulled into administrative work (for example, as head of department) so they have very limited time to carry out good quality research. Institutions need to put policies and incentives in place to encourage research and those that are successful in undertaking high quality research tend to have strong grant management systems.

Ways to improve

Professor Abubakar Ally outlined the following points as some of the ways stakeholders can address the challenges:

- Provide dedicated research time for academics.

- Introduce long term mentoring programmes, because having 3-month, 6-month or 1-year programmes may not be enough. It should be long term, where early career researchers build their careers by leveraging their mentors' expertise and networks over time.
- Create centres of excellence on Early Childhood Development training, research, and policy work. Such centres provide motivation for researchers.
- Strengthen the grant management support system. While supporting researchers is good, they will still not achieve much if the grant management support system is neglected.

She concluded by emphasising that researchers in Africa are incredibly motivated and have the capabilities to perform high quality research. All they need is support at the individual, institutional and systemic levels, to succeed.

5.2 A three-tier teaching model for teaching Mathematics in context

Our second presenter was Professor Ernest Kofi Davis, Professor of Mathematics Education and Provost of the College of Education Studies at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana.

In his presentation, Professor Davis discussed a three-tier teaching model for teaching mathematics in context. He highlighted the disconnect between what is taught in schools (curriculum) and the everyday language of Mathematics. For example, the issue of the use of English in schools vs. local language/indigenous language at home to solve mathematical problems. From his study, what the mathematics students learn in school and what they experience at home were mutually exclusive. *'In that case, how then do we build on what students already know, to help them appreciate what is being taught in school?'*, he asked.

To make the learning of mathematics relevant to children, Professor Davis emphasised the need to find creative ways to build on their everyday mathematical representations.

He shared these three tiers of the model:

TIER 1

Enculturating the student into their own culture of mathematics – that is, how they experience it in context (at home). For example, by being taught in their local language.

TIER 2

Transition from everyday mathematics into school mathematics. Teachers can expand the notion of mathematics to include school/international concepts. With that, the students can begin to appreciate the relationship between local knowledge and school knowledge.

TIER 3

Acculturation into school mathematics. Pupils are now able to understand school/international mathematics using mathematical concepts.

Professor Davis concluded his presentation by sharing some implications for teacher education:

- Existing teacher training does not equip teachers enough to draw on children's social and cultural backgrounds to inform their teaching. As such, there is a need to explore ways of introducing progressive teaching approaches, such as the Three-Tier Teaching Model for Teaching Mathematics in Context.
- Additionally, more local research on progressive approaches to teaching is needed, to make learning (more) relevant to students.

6. What we learned from the workshop's breakout sessions

Participants were divided into 16 groups with each group having between five to ten members. The aim of the breakout sessions was to provide the opportunity for participants to delve deeper into issues raised by the two presenters and to address the workshop's objectives.

Four main issues were discussed in the breakout session: research and policy gap, community of practice, needs of researchers, and ways to address identified needs.

6.1 Research/policy gaps

The views of the participants seemed to suggest a disconnect between research and policy. They highlighted that there is limited local evidence to solutions to local policy challenges. Some of the areas identified as needing more research because of their relevance for local policies include:

- Parental involvement in children's learning and wellbeing.
- Children with special needs.
- The complexity of mother tongue policy implementation in multicultural contexts.
- The role of play in children's development.
- Clarity about the conception of Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning from an African perspective. The understanding depends on the context and interest of researchers. For instance, the age range for Early Childhood Development can be from 0-3, 0-5, 0-8, among others. Also, researchers believe the focus of literacy and numeracy is narrow. Other areas needing attention include socio-emotional learning, and other transferable skills such as collaborative and problem solving.
- The role of Information and Communication Technology at lower levels of education.
- Climate change resilience, crisis, conflict, and their impact on children's development.

The discussions revealed some of the problems contributing to the weak link between research and policy. These include:

- Limited awareness of relevant policy directions among researchers.
- A lack of, or weak policy/ies on Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning. It was observed that some countries do not have comprehensive policies that have been developed through a broad consultation with stakeholders. For example, a researcher from Ghana observed that she was invited to a meeting to discuss Early Childhood Education policy when it was almost finalised. In addition, implementation plans are not clearly defined in terms of accountability and allocation of resources.
- Locally led research is conducted mainly by academics focusing on urban areas and often does not include groups in marginalised areas. Therefore, such research is not relevant for these marginalised groups.
- Because research mostly receives funding from sources outside of the country of focus, it might not necessarily address local policy priorities.

6.2 Community of practice

Establishing or belonging to a community of practice has many benefits, including opportunities for collaboration and learning. Discussions revealed existing networks at national, continental, and global levels. Examples of these networks include the Kenya Early Childhood Network, Literacy Association of South Africa, African Early Childhood Network, and the Comparative and International Education Society (See Appendix A for a list of networks).

However, these networks need to strengthen collaboration among themselves and create more awareness about their existence and value. Those requiring payment from prospective members may also have to consider how to be more inclusive. To achieve these, more financial support needs to be provided, for example by funders that are committed to enhancing whole child development. Funding can support organisations with experience of engaging sub-Saharan Africa researchers and networks, such as ESSA and REAL centre, to engage these networks and connect them with each other to enhance their impact.

6.3 Needs and priorities of researchers

Enhancing Africa-led research requires an environment that supports researchers to thrive and undertake high-quality research. However, in many contexts, the needs and priorities of researchers are not addressed adequately. Some of the identified needs and priorities mentioned are:

a. Access to resources

Research is driven by resources; therefore, limited resources greatly hamper quality research. A key concern of researchers is funding to undertake research. There is low funding from local sources and international funding is normally not accessible due to its competitiveness. Aside funding, other inputs such as access to peer-reviewed journals, stable internet and electricity, and computers are limited.

b. Research capacity

Having access to funding for research is good but without the skills to conduct high-quality research not much will be achieved. Like researchers elsewhere, Africa-based researchers need ongoing professional development. Those in their early career may require the most support through workshops and mentorship, to build their skills. In addition, learning about new methods and software for analysis are also necessary to be competitive. Furthermore, skills focusing on project management, and for engaging with policymakers to enable use of their research/evidence, should be prioritised. Specifically, graduate students should have training on Early Childhood Development assessment and measurement tools, research methods, and software for data collection and analysis (for example, 0-3 assessment, educational assessment, longitudinal approaches, and ethnographic studies).

c. Collaboration/partnership

Research collaboration can help to leverage expertise and resources to advance research production quickly. It may also help to reduce duplication and build on existing knowledge. However, it seems there is less collaboration among researchers from sub-Saharan Africa. A recent conference paper suggests that 8% of researchers collaborate with colleagues from their country, 18% with those from outside their country but in Africa, and 53% with those from outside Africa (Asare et al., 2023). These researchers and institutions most often work in isolation and sometimes in competition, instead of cooperation.

d. Research management support

Researchers in sub-Saharan Africa generally do not have adequate support from their institutions. For example, funding calls are not communicated on time to allow researchers to prepare good quality proposals. Ideally, researchers should have information about funding at least six months ahead of submission to prepare quality proposal. Another area of concern is internal review processes which can be cumbersome and long.

e. Heavy workload

The administrative work and teaching compete with research. In the contexts of sub-Saharan Africa where student-teacher ratio tends to be high, the problem becomes very challenging. Attending to a high numbers of students and providing support means academics have limited time to conduct high quality research. It is very common for an academic in sub-Saharan Africa to teach two or more courses alone, which can occupy their time throughout the week.

6.4 Ways to address the identified needs and priorities

Participants discussed and suggested ways to address their needs and priorities. Even though various stakeholders are making efforts to support researchers in the region, it was acknowledged that more can and needs to be done. Key words from the discussions are presented in Figure 2. The most noticeable words are **policymakers** and **researchers**. There is the need for a closer relationship between policymakers and researchers, to bring research and policy in alignment. Another key point was around data – its availability and management. **Data sharing** is identified as low hanging fruit to reduce research cost and speed up knowledge production. As expected, **more funding** is required, especially local funding, which is very low. Funding from international sources is difficult to access by researchers based in African institutions, due to its competitiveness and other factors.

Figure 2: Key words representing solutions to the identified needs and priorities



7. Concluding remarks

Professor Pauline Rose, Director of the REAL Centre, gave the closing remarks. She thanked the speakers and participants for attending and sharing lots of insights to enhance research focusing on Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning. Professor Rose also reemphasised the need to strengthen individuals and systems to enhance research focusing on the educational themes of interest, in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, she reminded the audience about the need for continuous dialogue to strengthen the link between research, policy, and practice, to ensure that evidence is used to enhance learning for children.

8. Recommendations for action

The workshop brought together more than 130 education stakeholders from Africa and beyond to discuss ways to enhance Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning research in sub-Saharan Africa. The recommendations presented here are drawn from the speaker presentations and discussions that took place in small breakout groups. The recommendations are grouped into three: the cross cutting ones, those focusing on Early Childhood Development specifically, and others focusing on Foundational Learning specifically.

Cross cutting recommendations

- African universities and related institutions should develop long term mentoring programmes in collaboration with other institutions in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond, to support future education researchers.
- Governments and funders should increase financial support to generate evidence for education themes that have limited research to bridge policy-research gaps. Ideally, the increase in funding needs to be disbursed through local mechanisms.
- Universities, funders, and governments should invest in professional development of researchers, especially early career researchers, through training in areas such as grant writing, project management, writing for publication in peer-reviewed journals, research methods, monitoring and evaluation, and engagement with policymakers for evidence uptake.
- Collaboration among researchers in sub-Saharan African needs to be strengthened. One way to do this is for researchers to be intentional about partnerships from Africa. Also, funders can encourage collaboration among researchers by providing funding that targets such collaborations and is designed in a way that gives adequate time.
- Universities and governments should collaborate to create environments that facilitate production of good quality research, such as manageable workload (one way to address this is for academics who win certain amount of grants are relieved of some teaching and administrative workload), access to good quality journals, improved internal research review process, and administrative support. Academics who
- Researchers need to ramp up awareness of policymakers and local businesses around evidence-informed policy, to increase public funding for research through closer engagements with policymakers.
- Researchers need to study education policies of political parties and focus on themes that are more likely to have bi-partisan support to ensure continuity of projects when there is a change in government.
- There is the need to increase advocacy for data sharing. For example, funders can put data sharing as a condition for supporting research.

Early Childhood Development recommendations

- Funders should support the creation of centres of excellence for Early Childhood Development training, research, and policy work.
- Graduate students should have training on Early Childhood Development assessment and measurement tools, research methods, and software for data collection and analysis (for example, 0-3 assessment, educational assessment, longitudinal approaches, and ethnographic study).
- Researchers need to develop context-specific Early Childhood Development tools because a lot of existing tools assume a very western model (for example, low class sizes).
- More research is needed to focus on areas with limited knowledge in Africa, such as parental engagement in children learning, climate change resilience, crisis, conflict, and its impact on children's development, etc.
- Funding and research Investment is required to understand how the little evidence on successful projects can be scaled up.

Foundational Learning recommendations

- Policymakers and funders should invest in progressive teaching approaches which incorporate student experiences in teaching mathematics (for example, the Three Tier Teaching Model).
- Policymakers should ensure clarity and harmonious assessment policy. For example, in some countries, L1 (mother tongue languages) is supposed to be the medium of instruction at pre-primary and early primary grades but performance-based assessment is done in L2 (English). There should be proper transitioning strategies from L1 as medium of instruction at the lower primary levels to L2 at the upper primary levels.
- More research is required to support the use of L1 (mother tongue languages) in Foundational Learning.
- More research is required to understand how quality assurance officers for pre-primary can be supported to assist teachers to enhance learning outcomes.
- Very few foundational learning networks were identified so funders should invest in understanding the existing few and whether there are more.

9. Next steps

These recommendations will guide future engagements with stakeholders and events. In particular, ESSA and the REAL Centre will organise an in person-event in Kenya in October 2023, to bring together a group of Africa-based researchers to further expand our understanding of their needs and identify concrete steps in addressing those needs and priorities. This In addition, blogs will be written on the recommendations and shared through the communication channels of ESSA, the REAL Centre, our collaborators and funders. The evidence and data from engaging with researchers will contribute to the formation of investment strategies for donors.

We will prepare a synthesis of insights from this workshop, the survey results, and the in person workshop in October in Kenya, to provide a comprehensive overview of Early Childhood and Foundational Learning researchers needs and how to address them.

10. Contact

For further information please contact ESSA at researchenquiries@essa-africa.org, or the REAL Centre at REALCentre@educ.cam.ac.uk.

Visit the African Education Research Database: <https://essa-africa.org/AERD>

11. Appendix A: Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning networks and communities of practice

Early Childhood Development (ECD) Networks	Foundational Learning Networks
Tanzania ECD Network (TECDEN)	Literacy Association of South Africa
Tanzania Education Network	People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network
Kenya ECD Network	Early Learning Partnership (ELP)
Women Education Researchers of Kenya	Pan-African Literacy for All
Africa Early Childhood Network	International Literacy Association
Ghana ECD Network	Professional Learning Communities (PLC), Ghana – for pre-tertiary teachers including Literacy/ Numeracy teachers at the lower primary and kindergarten levels
Early Years Fellowship – Word Bank	
Southern Africa Network for Early Childhood Development	
National Network of Actors for ECD in Senegal	
Liberia Early Childhood Professional Network	
Malawi ECD Coalition	
Lesotho ECD Network	
Mozambique ECD Network	
Rwanda Education NGO coordination platform	
Swaziland ECD Network	
Zimbabwe ECD Actors	

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