

Early Childhood Care and Education in Peru: Evidence from Young Lives



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“Early childhood care and education are the foundations of Education For All” (UNESCO 2010: 5).

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes are increasingly recognised as being important in achieving a number of social, cultural and economic goals which are vital in the fight against poverty. Significant investments in ECCE have been made across Latin America, and the Peruvian government is committed to increasing and improving existing services. Research from Young Lives in Peru finds that four out of five boys and girls among a sample of nearly 2,000 children accessed early education between the ages of 3 and 6. But it also shows that access is unequal. Gender, ethnicity, place of residence and mother tongue all have a significant effect on attendance. Furthermore, ECCE attendance by children under the age of 3 is very low. These findings suggest the need to target investment in ECCE to overcome unequal access, and to increase investment in services designed for children under 3.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is receiving increasing attention in international policy debates. Its many benefits range from the personal to the economic, through the familial, social and cultural. Evidence from developing countries suggests that ECCE programmes which include immunisation and nutrition promote healthy parenting practices. Those offering spaces for recreation and learning contribute significantly to children’s overall development and welfare.

Major efforts have been made to achieve effective ECCE in Latin American and the Caribbean. Levels of ECCE coverage have reached impressive levels compared with other parts of the world. But high national averages can obscure stark inequalities in access to services. These inequalities are often associated with poverty, gender and place of residence.

Reflecting the regional trend, the Peruvian Government has in the last decade made a series of commitments to increase and improve the quality of nutrition, health and early childhood education services. These include the *Acuerdo Nacional* (National Agreement), the Plan of Action for Children and Young People, the National Education Project and the Social Pact for Early Childhood. Despite these efforts, access to good ECCE services remains limited.

This Policy Brief presents the findings of a study of early childhood transitions, part of longitudinal research carried out by Young Lives in Peru. It examines the patterns of access to and use of ECCE programmes by a sample of approximately 2,000 children born between 2000 and 2001. The findings come from the 2006 round of the Young Lives survey, and from qualitative research conducted in 2007 and 2008 with a sub-sample of children, parents and teachers in four different regions. The study asks how these children and their families, teachers and communities experience the beginning of school life. What are the key factors that positively or negatively influence these experiences?



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Early childhood care and education for Young Lives children in Peru

- Four out of five children in the Young Lives sample attended an early education centre between the ages of 3 and 6.
- Only one in five children had access to an ECCE programme before 2 years of age.
- Being a girl, living with a disability, speaking a language other than Spanish, coming from a poor household or living in a rural area all reduced the possibility of attending an early education centre.

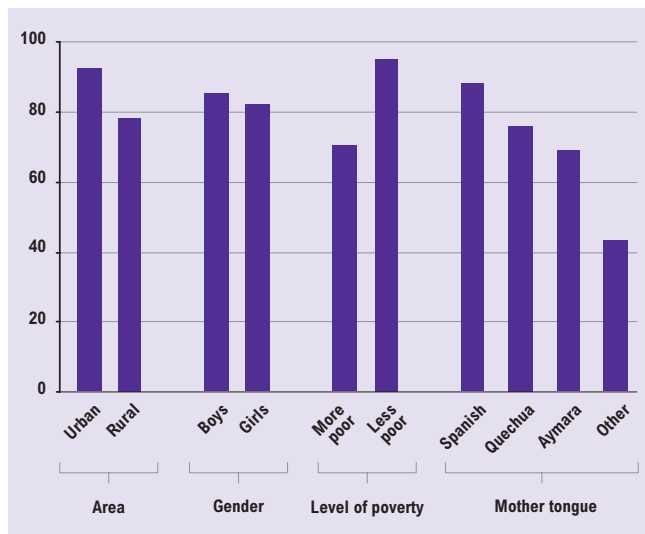
Who accesses ECCE programmes?

According to Peru's National Institute of Statistics and Information (INEI), the national coverage of early education for children between 3 and 5 years old was 66 per cent in 2008. This reflected an increase of nearly 11 per cent since 2005. The proportion of boys and girls in the Young Lives sample with early education experiences is also high. In 2006, 84 per cent of caregivers reported that their child had attended an early education programme from the age of 3. But there is significant inequality in access (see Figure 1).

“Inequality of access to and use of ECCE services is linked to household poverty, geographic location, health of the child, language and ethnicity.”

Figure 1 shows that attendance at early learning centres is associated with household wealth. Twenty-nine per cent of boys and girls from the poorest households in the sample did not attend an early learning centre, compared with just 4 per cent of children from households classified as 'less poor'.

Figure 1: Percentage of children aged 3-6 receiving early education (Young Lives younger cohort, 2006)



Ethnicity is also an important factor in access to early learning programmes. About 90 per cent of children of Spanish-speaking mothers attended from the age of 3. But those children whose mothers speak Quechua, Aymara or other indigenous languages were 12, 18 and 45 per cent less likely respectively to attend an early learning centre.

Gender is also a factor. Although it is not statistically significant across the whole sample, it is in rural areas. In the qualitative component of the study, the group of children who did not attend an early learning centre was made up entirely of girls.

There were other marked differences between urban and rural areas. More than 92 per cent of the urban sample reported attendance at an early learning centre after the age of 3, compared with 78 per cent of the rural sample.

Another important geographic factor in accessing early learning centres was distance. While primary schools are found in 93 per cent of the communities where the Young Lives children live, early learning centres are accessible in only 73 per cent of the communities, and 'near' another 13 per cent. But as Carmen's story shows, 'near' is not always near enough.

Carmen's story: the challenges of early childhood education in rural areas

Carmen lives with her parents and teenage sister in a rural village in the Peruvian high selva [jungle]. When Young Lives visited in 2007, Carmen was 5 years old and spent her time at home, anxiously waiting to go to school the following year. Her parents had decided not to send her to the early learning centre. While it was only 15 minutes from home, Carmen would have had to walk alone each morning along the *Carretera Marginal de la Selva* [the main highway] to arrive at classes which began at 9am. No one at home was free to go with her. Her sister needed to be at school by 8am and her parents started work on their land even earlier. By 2008, Carmen had started first grade, and could be seen walking to school accompanied by other children living near her home.

Carmen's difficulties highlight the need to adapt early childhood education programming to the local context in which young children live by, for example, making hours of care more flexible.

Differences in the quality of care

Although most of the children in the sample had some experience of early education, there were marked differences in the type of institution they attended and in the quality of care they received. In our sample, four out of every five children went to a state-run centre. The rest were enrolled in private ECCE centres. The private sector has grown rapidly, with the number of private centres increasing by 57 per cent between 1998 and 2008.

The type of service accessed by children is determined by the levels of household poverty. 'Less poor' households are more likely to send their children to private centres, while state-run services are the only option available for poorer households. However, there is some movement of children between private and state-run centres, with 110 of the children in the sample changing from one early learning centre to another. Despite this movement, experiences of early childhood education tend to lay the path which



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children will continue along in primary school. Most children who attended a state-run early learning centre subsequently entered a state-run primary school.

These patterns are worrying in light of the differences between public and private education. According to the National Evaluation in 2007, students who attended private schools performed almost twice as well in integrated communication and logical mathematics as children who attended state-run schools. These differences in quality mean that most children in Peru begin their school life at a disadvantage. Their education offers them relatively few opportunities to break the cycle of poverty.

ECCE for children under 3

The coverage of ECCE programmes aimed at children below the age of 3 is very low, at just over 4 per cent nationally and only 2 per cent in rural areas. Among the Young Lives cohort, one in five children attended a centre before reaching the age of 3. In rural areas, this fell to less than 3 per cent. Interviewees said that the main reasons for children not attending were a lack of local services and, where services did exist, an inability to pay 'hidden' or 'indirect' costs. Approximately 80 per cent of caregivers whose children attended state-run early learning centres reported having made a payment for their children to attend, even though these services are in principle free of charge. A group of early learning teachers who were interviewed said they had to ask parents to pay for educational materials, as the resources provided by the Ministry of Education were insufficient.

In addition to providing educational services, ECCE programmes have the potential to support health and nutrition during the early years. This is vital in countries like Peru where the rate of child malnutrition and the prevalence of anaemia remain high, and where large numbers of children contract diseases which could be prevented through vaccination. Thirty-seven per cent the children in the sample were small for their age in 2006, an indicator of the chronic malnutrition which can negatively affect children's cognitive performance in later years. This, combined with the low level ECCE coverage for under 3s, indicates that the potential of early intervention is not being met.

Gaps between early and primary education

Most early childhood education services in Peru are administratively and institutionally separate from primary schools. There are also differences between their professional structures, educational philosophy and curricula. The children participating in our interviews highlighted discontinuities and contrasts between the systems of early learning and primary education that hinder their early transitions. The three main areas of discontinuity are:

- Inadequate communication, coordination and integration between early learning and primary systems
- Organisational and cultural differences in classroom management and in the training of early learning and primary school teachers
- Lack of preparation and support for children and their caregivers for the transition to primary school.

The study also found little coordination or dialogue between early learning and primary school teachers. This leaves the burden of adapting from early learning to primary school on the shoulders of children and their families, doing little to facilitate a positive transition. Many children entering primary school are met with practices that inhibit their full development and learning, such as corporal punishment or verbal mistreatment. Many primary schools also demonstrate limited recognition of and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity among the school population.

Policy strategies for overcoming inequalities

The educational goals proposed by the Government of Peru include providing universal coverage of education programmes to children from 3 to 6 years of age by the end of 2021, and gradually raising the proportion of children under 3 who access ECCE programmes. Our findings highlight the need to ensure equal access to and use of ECCE services, with special emphasis on poor households, those living in remote or rural areas and those belonging to indigenous groups. They also suggest that improvements in the quality of both private and public services are needed if ECCE programmes are to meet their potential to reduce social, cultural and economic inequalities.

Three key strategies are essential to meeting these goals:

- **Expanding ECCE care for children under 3.** This care should integrate learning and recreation and include nutrition and immunisation components. Expansion could be achieved by strengthening the government's existing *Wawa Wasi* programme as it is absorbed into the new *Cuna Mas* programme announced by the Government in early 2012, which offers the possibility of reaching vulnerable and remote populations from a

community-based perspective which incorporates and respects local culture.

- **Offering high-quality early education to facilitate positive transitions to primary school.** This means supporting ECCE programmes which help boys and girls to develop their motor, cognitive, social, cultural and emotional skills in preparation for their future school life, while respecting their developmental needs and natural rhythm of learning. At the same time, primary schools should be better prepared to receive children entering the first grade by ensuring curriculum continuity and promoting specialised teacher training. Improving early education could be achieved by improving the quality of care offered by existing programmes such as the PRONEI, which is precisely targeted to serve the children in marginalised rural and urban areas.
- **Increasing investment in early education.** Relatively low levels of financial investment in early childhood education affect the quality of programmes and services available and contradict the government's political commitments to children under 6. It is essential to gradually increase investment in education, with specific annual goals and special attention to children under 3 years of age. This would allow the reversal of growing inequalities in access to and quality of ECCE and primary education.

“It is essential to gradually increase investment in education, with specific annual goals, placing special attention on the population under 3 years of age, so as to permit the reversal of growing inequities in the quality of and access to education.”

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