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Quality Early Learning: Barriers and Opportunities

Globally, early childhood development (ECD) is recognised as the most critical period for later educational achievement and lifelong success. Defined internationally as the period of life before birth to age eight, pre-primary education and the first one to three years of primary school are a significant component of this period. The overwhelming evidence coupled with the inclusion of ECD in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is prompting rapid expansion of pre-primary education particularly among low and middle income countries. This rapid expansion is occurring amidst resource constraints and a limited understanding of what constitutes quality early learning. Now is a time for us to be both vigilant and proactive in ensuring quality early learning experiences for children's overall development as confident, capable, creative and caring people.

Ensuring a wider understanding of what is needed in the early years – pre-primary and early primary - is particularly important given the pressure in many poorly resourced contexts on narrowly conceived literacy and numeracy targets in early primary. Too often we are seeing this transferring to pressure on preschools to adopt a stronger focus on 'academic' preparation for school despite the weight of international evidence that an earlier start in academic instruction gains children nothing over the long term and may even interfere with their ultimate skills and comprehension (Sebastian, P, 2009; Sebastian et al 2013)).

This session will draw on examples from research and practice across Central Asia and East Africa to prompt reflection on the following questions:

- How do we ensure that the phrase "ready for primary education" in SDG 4.2 is well understood by parents, governments, the private sector, and civil society to encompass multiple aspects of child development: social, emotional, motor, language and cognitive as well as physical well-being, approach to learning, and general knowledge about his or her world?
- How do we ensure the adoption of developmentally appropriate practices rather than a downward extension of Grade 1 with developmentally inappropriate practices and a focus on narrowly conceived knowledge-based academic development?
- How do we hold the education system to account so that it is not just about children being ready for school but about schools being ready for children?
- How do we change the mindset of parents/caregivers and communities to appreciate and value play-based learning?