



Identifying and addressing professional development needs of early childhood development and foundational learning researchers in sub-Saharan Africa

Summary report for action

Authors

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List of abbreviations

APHRC	African Population and Health Research Centre
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EERA	Enhancing Education Research in Africa
ESSA	Education Sub-Saharan Africa
FL	Foundational Learning
INASP	International Network for Advancing Science and Policy
RCTs	Randomised Controlled Trials
REPSSI	Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative

Introduction

[Education Sub Saharan Africa \(ESSA\)](#) and the [Research for Equitable Access and Learning \(REAL\)](#) Centre at the University of Cambridge are contributing to efforts to address challenges facing researchers through projects focusing on [Early Childhood Development \(ECD\)](#) and [Foundational Learning \(FL\)](#). Funding is from [Conrad N. Hilton Foundation](#) and [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), respectively. The projects' goal is to improve the accessibility and use of research evidence generated by Africa-based researchers focusing on ECD and FL in decision-making by various stakeholders (e.g. policymakers, researchers, funders/investors and practitioners).

This report summarises insights from our engagements with ECD and FL researchers involved in the two projects, to better understand the professional development needs of the Africa-based researchers and how those needs could be addressed. This summary report therefore provides guidance to enable **funders/investors** to cost-effectively support the professional development of such researchers, in order to conduct policy-relevant research for impact.

Our summary report begins by outlining our engagement with researchers. We then share insights gained from them and discuss how we are collaborating with other partners to address the identified needs. In the final section, we reflect on our findings, share a conclusion and outline next steps.

How we engaged the researchers

We considered a broad and inclusive approach to ensure data was collected from diverse perspectives. The approach of engagement comprised an online survey, online and in-person workshops, and consultations with experts.

Online survey

A survey was rolled out from December 2022 to May 2023 in English and French to learn more about the professional development needs of these researchers. The survey targeted sub-Saharan Africa-based researchers working in FL (numeracy, literacy, and socio-emotional skills of primary school children) and ECD (health, nutrition, education, play, environment and protection, and responsive caregiving/parenting). We received 272 responses, comprising 59 percent male and 41 percent female.

The majority of the researchers (47 percent) had a PhD degree, followed by a Masters degree (38 percent). These researchers came from 20 sub-Saharan African countries, with almost three in four (72 percent) from five countries comprising Kenya (18 percent), Ghana (14 percent), Tanzania (14 percent), Nigeria (13 percent) and South Africa (13 percent). Non-English-speaking countries were underrepresented with countries such as Senegal, Mozambique, Cape Verde and Democratic Republic of Congo, having 1 percent each. In total we had 118 ECD researchers, 58 FL researchers and 96 researchers indicating they work in both ECD and FL.

Online and in-person workshops

On 19 April 2023, a virtual workshop was held 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, mainly from Africa, to deliberate ways to enhance ECD and FL research in Africa. We had two main speakers addressing ECD and FL, respectively. Additionally, we had a breakout session of 16 groups, comprising 10 ECD (including one for French speakers) and 6 FL (including one for French speakers), with each group having around 8 people. More information about the workshop is available in a workshop report (Asare et al., 2023).

Building on recommendations from the virtual workshop, we held a two-day in-person version in Nairobi, Kenya, in October 2023. It brought together 53 (comprising 23 male and 30 female) invited education stakeholders, mainly researchers but also funders, policymakers and practitioners from 21 sub-Saharan African countries, to have a deeper deliberation and opportunities for networking (Samson, Asare & Essah, 2023).

Consultation with experts

The third approach we adopted was consultations with experts. We held online and in-person consultations, mainly between May 2022 and December 2023, with individuals and organisations in the ECD and FL space in Africa. The conversations were centred around the work of these individuals and organisations, what is going well and how stakeholders can support them to improve their work.

In Ghana, we met with Sabre Foundation, the University of Cape Coast's Department of Early Childhood Education, as well as the ECD Network of Ghana. In Kenya, we engaged with Zizi Afrique Foundation and the African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC). In Senegal, we spoke with eight researchers from Gaston Berger University and Cheikh Anta Diop University and two policymakers from the Ministry of National Education. Additionally, we spoke with Tanzania Early Childhood Network, AfriChild Centre at Makerere University in Uganda, Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) in East Africa, amongst others.

We also relied on the guidance and advice from the Advisory Group for the projects. The Group includes Professor Mavis Gako-Gyeke (University of Ghana), Professor Belay Hagos (Addis Ababa University), Dr Mary Goretti Nakabugo (Executive Director for Uwezo Uganda), and Professor Efua Irene Amenyah Sarr (Gaston Berger University, Senegal).

What we learned from our engagements with researchers

In the previous section, we presented the various methods used to engage researchers. Here, we outline synthesised insights of what we learned from our engagements around professional development needs. These needs are not disaggregated because they were generally consistent among the ECD and FL researchers. However, we stress specific areas where the needs differ.

Training opportunities required

- Research grant proposal writing
- Policy briefs and journal articles (including peer review skills)
- Management of research grants
- Multi-disciplinary research (e.g. longitudinal study, implementation research, participatory research, action research and data analysis for quantitative and qualitative research, as well as artificial intelligence for research). **Specific to ECD is development of context-relevant ECD assessment tools.**
- Networking and use of social media
- Engaging with the public about research findings (e.g. parents and media) and developing a communication strategy
- ECD researchers mentioned introductory training in relevant disciplines such as child psychology, educational anthropology, social psychology, and neuroscience
- Doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships in African universities
- Design thinking.

Opportunities for collaboration

- Exchange programmes for doctoral students, early career and female researchers (funding to attend international conferences, facilitation of travel visas, etc.)
- A database of funders for easy identification of opportunities
- Community of practice/networks for collaboration and knowledge sharing, including comprehensive database profiling Africa-based researchers working in ECD and FL
- Closer collaboration between researchers and policymakers for policy relevant research agenda, and evidence uptake and use
- Small grants to encourage collaboration among Africa-based researchers for policy relevant research.

Research communication

- Funding for open access publications
- Investment in local journals, to enhance the visibility of research. ECD researchers specified journals for academic and general audiences (e.g. a journal for ECD peer-reviewed publications and another for policy briefs, working papers, reports, etc.)
- Strengthening institutional repositories for easy access and dissemination of research.

Mentorship programmes

- Mentorship (e.g. engaging senior academics to support early career researchers for long term – up to five years. This will require resource to compensate mentors for their time.)
- Mentorship as a principle in funding calls/large grants, including those for PhD studentships and postdoctoral positions.

Advocacy for more support

- Advocacy for more investment in professional development needs to intensify (e.g. funders who are at the forefront of investing in professional development of Africa-based researchers need to ramp up efforts to bring in more funders)
- Other stakeholders such as researchers themselves and not-for-profit organisations need to work harder to get more resources, especially from Africa, to support researchers.

How we are working with partners to address professional development needs

Having listened to the researchers, ESSA and the REAL Centre piloted co-developed solutions to address top needs identified by the researchers. For instance, ten ECD researchers comprising six women and four men from seven African countries were sponsored to attend the Eastern Africa Regional Early Childhood Conference in Tanzania in March 2024. They presented their work and served in other capacities, such as parallel session moderators. Following their attendance, each researcher wrote a blog about their presentations and experiences, which are currently being published [on ESSA's website](#). This experience encouraged collaboration, leading to three researchers co-preparing and submitting a proposal to a funder for support.

In addition to the conference, we collaborated with external providers to run two workshops on grant proposal writing. The aims of the workshops were to enhance ECD and FL researchers' knowledge and skills in grant proposal writing, as well as to provide opportunities for networking and potential collaboration. The first workshop was run by the [APHRC](#) from 24 to 28 June 2024 in Nairobi, Kenya, for ECD researchers. It brought together 24 ECD researchers (14 females and 10 males), including a few policymakers from nine African countries. Post workshop evaluation showed that participants were satisfied with the workshop. For example, 93 percent gave the overall rating as 'very good' or 'excellent'. Some of the quotes from participants to explain this high rating are:

The workshop exceeded my expectations due to its content, step-by-step methodology and the interactive way in which facilitators taught the sections, which allowed for a lot of learning. It also allowed me to have several ideas and confidence on how to design, compete and win grants.

I thought I was only going to learn about grant writing, but I have realised that even my research skills have increased, and I believe I can even supervise my students better.

The second workshop was run by [INASP](#) from 22 to 25 July 2024 in Accra, Ghana, for FL researchers. It included 25 FL researchers (13 females and 12 males), including a few policymakers from 10 African countries. Similar to the workshop in Kenya, participants rated the Ghana workshop high – 95 percent gave the overall rating as ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’. Examples of their quotes to justify this high rating include:

Key areas of grant proposal writing were discussed in detail. The online course provided a very useful background for the in-person discussions during the training.

The workshop has given me confidence in grant writing. I am looking forward to pursuing several research grants to realise my dreams around education.

Conclusion, reflections and next steps

ESSA and the REAL Centre have learned from engagements with ECD and FL researchers in Africa that despite efforts by stakeholders to enhance their work, a lot more needs to be done to support these researchers to have greater impact. We identified a huge gap between demand for such training opportunities, and the available spaces. For example, our call for the grant proposal writing workshop (which restricted eligibility to PhD or comparable experience) received 190 applications from ECD researchers and 135 applications from FL researchers. However, we could only provide opportunities for approximately 25 researchers in each instance due to budget limitation. It was also evident in the process of identifying and engaging with training providers that not much exists for ECD and particularly FL-specific researchers. The available opportunities are mostly for those conducting research in health, and those requiring training in the use of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs).

We will build on successes from the pilot workshops and use the lessons learnt to improve future workshops that we may secure funding for. We will also continue to engage stakeholders, especially funders, subject to advice from the projects’ Advisory Group to expand support for researchers. The insights from this summary will complement the [Enhancing Education Research in Africa \(EERA\)](#) project, which aims to determine the prerequisites for establishing a strong and sustainable African education research system and design funding pathways to strengthen education research in Africa.

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Resources

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

Blog series on early childhood development <https://essa-africa.org/node/1935>

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