



Students at the enhanced school readiness program (e-SRP) at the Sekondari centre, responding to questions posed by their Community Teaching Assistant.

Closing the Learning Gap for Young Boys and Girls in Tanzania

Many children from disadvantaged households in Tanzania cannot access quality pre-primary education (PPE). PPE is a critical component in a child’s life and evidence shows that it can significantly increase a child’s level of readiness for school and lifelong learning. Through an action research project called LEARN Plus, an accelerated pre-primary education model called the “School Readiness Program”, has been enhanced and tested in Tanzania to provide children in disadvantageous circumstances with access to quality, gender-responsive early childhood education.



KEY FINDINGS

1

The enhanced School Readiness Program (e-SRP) is a promising approach to universalizing access to early childhood education and developing school readiness of children and there is a need for it to be expanded and scaled.

2

Implementation and sustainability of the e-SRP is enhanced with buy-in and collaboration of government stakeholders.

3

Community sensitization and mobilization activities are integral to establishing the responsibilities of community members, parents and caregivers, socializing gender equality and inclusion (GEI) principles, and ensuring safe learning environments for children.

4

The e-SRP aligns with existing gender-responsive national policies and pre-primary and inclusive education guidelines, which is key in ensuring the policies are applied at the classroom and community level.



Pupils posing outside the classroom of the Sekondari e-SRP centre.

What's At Stake?

In Tanzania, a country in East Africa with a population of over 65 million, 59.5% of 5-year-old children do not have access to pre-primary education (PPE). Quality education at the pre-primary level is also a major issue as the pupil-to-qualified-teacher ratio is 131:1 at that level.ⁱ With poor access to quality early education, many children enter primary school unprepared, without a good foundation from which they can succeed.

Quality PPE sets a strong foundation for learning and evidence shows that it can significantly increase a child's level of readiness for school. When a child receives quality pre-primary education, they perform consistently better in school and are more likely to enter school on time. They are less likely to drop out or repeat grades and more likely to complete primary and secondary school.ⁱⁱ

Through an action research project called LEARN Plus, Plan International Canada, in partnership with Plan International Tanzania and the Mother Child

Education Foundation (AÇEV), are supporting the government of Tanzania in adapting, testing and scaling an enhanced school readiness program (e-SRP) to provide children in disadvantaged circumstances access to quality, gender-responsive early childhood education services. The project was launched in Tanzania in 2021 with support from the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange and is set to be completed by December 2024.

This policy brief shares findings and recommendations from the project, with an aim to inform policy responses by key decision-makers in Tanzania who are working on education, gender equality, inclusion and early childhood development (ECD).

Methodology

The enhanced SRP model is a proven innovation that was adopted from the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) in Turkey. The model has now been adapted, tested and scaled in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Tanzania. It is a short and intensive program that is delivered 2–3 months before the start of a new school year. It seeks to develop the physical, language, cognitive and socio-emotional skills of children who are about to enter grade 1 (typically aged 5-6) and have no preschool experience. It aims to prepare children for primary school through gender-responsive and inclusive approaches.

In Tanzania, a version of this accelerated pre-primary school model was first introduced in 2015 by the Tanzania Institute of Education with support from the UKAID's EQUIP project under the name School Readiness Program (SRP). Given the recommendations from the evaluation of the program, Plan International, in collaboration with government

partners, enhanced the program by placing greater emphasis on gender equality and inclusion and enhancing content and practices around cognitive development, nutrition and hygiene in the program. The government partners included the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), and the President's Office, Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG). The LEARN Plus project also integrated a parent education component and strengthened community participation in order to support improved access to education in pre-primary education and beyond.

After it was piloted, the enhanced SRP was rolled out to 29 communities in the Kisarawe District of Tanzania and provided pre-primary education for 533 children (257 girls, 276 boys) including 22 children with disabilities (7 girls and 15 boys). The children participating in the enhanced SRP were age 5 as that is the age that Tanzania's Ministry of

A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH TO SKILLS BUILDING

Through a daily routine of child-centred and play-based indoor and outdoor activities, the enhanced SRP focuses on skills-building in the following four domains:

1
PHYSICAL
To promote the development of self-care skills and encourage movement, physical activity and healthy eating.

2
LANGUAGE
To promote reading readiness and oral communications.

3
COGNITIVE
To stimulate conceptual development and the acquisition of pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills.

4
SOCIO-EMOTIONAL
To promote the ability to recognize and communicate emotions and establish positive relationships with peers and adults.

Education prescribes for the pre-primary level. Classes were taught by community teaching assistants (CTAs) for 3.5 hours/day, 4 days/week over 12 weeks and were held in safe community spaces with access to clean water and toilet facilities. CTAs were local volunteers from the communities. They were vetted by community leaders and trained by Plan International Tanzania and government education officials to teach students enrolled in the enhanced SRP. The program consisted of a daily routine of play-based activities designed to support the acquisition of foundational skills –social skills, pre-literacy and numeracy skills and curiosity to learn – and promoted gender-responsive and inclusive teaching and learning approaches, good hygiene and good nutrition. Parents and caregivers with children participating in the program, participated in six parenting sessions over the 12 weeks of

the program, that informed them on gender-responsive parenting skills and how to support children’s learning at home.

Overall, the program has provided a stopgap measure to increase access to PPE and prepare children for Standard 1.

(LEFT) Students from the e-SRP at the Sekondari centre singing a song called “Kitomondo” as instructed by their Community Teaching Assistant. (RIGHT) One of the female students from the e-SRP at the Vizembe centre smiling from excitement at the time she spent at the centre.



Action Research Approach

The LEARN Plus project engaged the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to conduct several studies between 2021–2023 to determine the effectiveness, cost and sustainability of the program, with a focus on the impact of the enhanced SRP on the educational outcomes of the children involved in the program and caregiver/ parents’ engagement.

This involved the implementation of research and gender equality and inclusion (GEI) studies that looked at gender-responsive and inclusive teaching practices, community support and parental engagement, scalability and sustainability. The impact study compared children that participated in the enhanced SRP with those that did not. It shed light on the impact of the program in improving

school readiness, on-time enrolment, learning and persistence in standard 1. It also illustrated gender disparities in outcomes and parental engagement in support of early education. Lastly, a cost study was conducted to provide a comprehensive picture of the resources needed to design, implement and monitor the enhanced SRP model in Tanzania.

Shamila, the community teaching assistant for the e-SRP at the Sekondari centre guiding the students on how to do their class activities.



HOW MUCH DOES THE ENHANCED SRP COST PER CHILD?

Understanding the true costs of the program can inform the resources needed to scale up or adapt the SRP in another setting.

In 2022, the overall cost of the enhanced SRP per child was **361,040 TZS/**
US \$144

This included the opportunity cost of personnel time (60% of the total cost) as well as the costs associated with the development of training materials, facilitator training, enrolment, offering the enhanced SRP, educational materials for children, and monitoring. This estimate also includes the start-up cost, which represents about 35% of the overall cost. Therefore, the cost of the program could decrease to 233,741 TZS (US\$93) or lower per child if the initiative were rolled out in the same communities again, as the materials and the training have already been designed and teachers, school heads and CTAs might need only a refresher training every year.

Key Findings

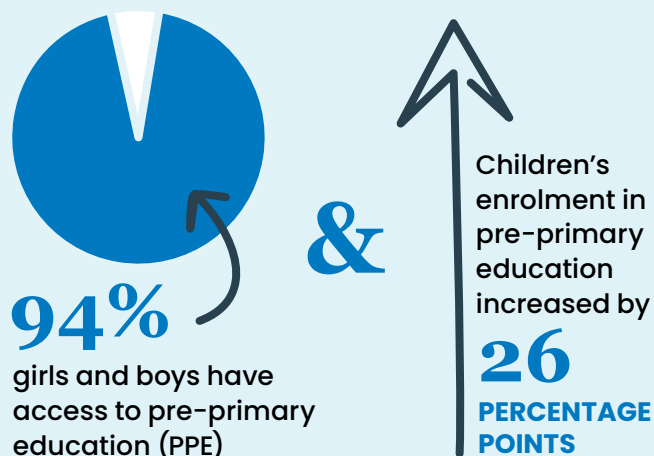
1. The enhanced School Readiness Program (e-SRP) is a promising approach to universalizing access to early childhood education and developing school readiness of children and there is a need for it to be expanded and scaled.

During the LEARN Plus project, the enhanced SRP led to nearly universal access to pre-primary education for both girls and boys (94%). In addition, the program increased children's enrolment in pre-primary education by 26 percentage points above those who were not involved in the program. Stakeholders consider it to be a timely, relevant and essential initiative for promoting access to PPE in marginalized geographies in Kisarawe and other districts with similar background characteristics. The e-SRP has received support from the communities where it has been implemented and e-SRP centres are running beyond pilot implementation with support of participating families and community members.



Hamza, a student from the e-SRP at the Sekondari centre engaging in a classroom activity.

THROUGH THE LEARN PLUS PROJECT:



Offering the enhanced SRP also improved children's school readiness. Despite commendable success in building children's school readiness, there were challenges in sustaining children's learning and development skills throughout standard 1. At the start of standard 1 (midline), the enhanced SRP had a significant positive impact on the emergent numeracy, motor skills and socio-emotional skills of children, but by the end of standard 1 (endline), many of these learning impacts had faded away save for a small sustained positive impact on the socio-emotional learning of children. It is possible that the gains in school readiness seen at midline could not be sustained in standard 1, given the low daily attendance rate of children in primary school. Low attendance rates (i.e. missing 1/5 days of school on average) were common among both children who did and did not participate in the enhanced SRP. It is therefore important to work with parents and communities to ensure that children regularly attend standard 1, and to emphasize the importance of enrolling in standard 1 on time.

2. The implementation and sustainability of the e-SRP is enhanced with buy-in and collaboration of government and community stakeholders.

The LEARN Plus project worked closely with national, regional and local government stakeholders to adapt and pilot-test the program. This included the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), the President's Office, Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) and the Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women and Special Groups in Tanzania. Local government officials at the district and ward levels were instrumental in the establishment of the enhanced SRP and the knowledge and skills gained along the way will persist even when the support from the LEARN Plus project ends. This collaboration helped to ensure that the enhanced SRP initiative was properly aligned with national and local government efforts to promote equitable access and learning to all children. Buy-in and engagement of ministries responsible for education and collaboration with local government authorities and communities were key contributing factors to the successful implementation of the enhanced SRP program.

Sustaining collaboration with local government leaders and community leaders proved challenging following the establishment of the enhanced SRP centres. Community leaders mobilized community resources in supporting the implementation of SRP centres, making them influential in the centre's developments. However, engagement by community leaders diminished, which resulted in limited developments within the enhanced SRP centres, including some centres still running under temporary buildings and sharing classrooms with other community activities. This has implications for the sustainability of the enhanced SRP centres as their existence is highly dependent on the decisions and compliance of the owners of these establishments.

3. Community sensitization and mobilization activities are integral to establishing the responsibilities of community members, parents and caregivers, socializing GEI principles, and ensuring safe learning environments for children.

While engagement with local communities was a crucial factor to the success of the enhanced SRP centres, sustaining this engagement was challenging. Community sensitization and mobilization activities initiated under the LEARN Plus project aimed at promoting community awareness around the importance of the e-SRP centres, not only to children but also the community at large. In this initiative, community members were meant to be responsible for supporting the establishment and operation of the enhanced SRP centres and for contributing to activities such as infrastructure maintenance, centre upkeep and cleanliness, and provision of food for the children in the program. While many members could understand the value of the enhanced SRP model in providing children access to pre-primary education, there was limited uptake in their attention to these duties. Many of the responsibilities that were meant to be carried out by the community as a whole, ended up falling on the parents who had children at the e-SRP centres. In addition, not all parents were fully committed to their duties at these centres, which created additional burden on the CTAs.



Through the parent engagement sessions, the enhanced SRP also led families from the communities to engage with their young children in more enriching ways, such as reading to or playing with their children so as to better support early learning and development. Educating parents and caregivers helped enhance their knowledge and skills in supporting the holistic development of their children during their pre-primary education. While mothers and fathers were engaged in the enhanced SRP implementation, fathers had limited engagement due to economic demands.

While parent engagement sessions socialized key principles around gender equality and inclusion (GEI), the attitudes of parents/caregivers towards GEI in education remained unchanged and about 1 in 3 parents held beliefs that were not gender equal, such as valuing education for boys more than girls. The GEI study found that a higher percentage of boys were enrolled in the enhanced SRP than girls, which indicates that education was seen as less of a priority for that demographic. In addition, it was found that most children with special needs were not enrolled in school given parent/caregiver undervaluation of their education and a perception that these children would not receive the extra attention they required from teachers. It is therefore important to strengthen messaging around gender equality and inclusion during parenting education and community mobilization.



4. The e-SRP aligns with existing gender-responsive national policies and pre-primary and inclusive education guidelines, which is key in ensuring the policies are applied at the classroom and community level.

An analysis of policy documents and guidelines by the Government of Tanzania revealed that the PPE curriculum, syllabus and textbooks are informed by gender-responsive principles, such as considering gender stereotypes and how the roles of girls and boys are portrayed in teaching and learning materials. However, there remains a gap in the application of these principles and requirements at the community and class levels due to various reasons including social norms, lack of gender equality knowledge and limited community sensitization.

The enhanced SRP was found to be aligned to national policies on gender equality, pre-primary and inclusive education. To translate these policies to action at the classroom level, CTAs were trained in gender-responsive pedagogy and how to consider the learning and gender-specific needs of the children in their classes when leading classroom activities. As a result, both boys and girls were treated fairly in the classroom and received equal opportunities in all teaching and learning activities. However, divisions between children according to gender could be observed at times in how girl and boy children played or sat separately from each other in class. It is encouraged for boys and girls to interact together in the classroom, but sometimes social or religious norms around how boys and girls should interact get in the way of that. CTAs also faced challenges in identifying learning differences in children with special needs and in providing the appropriate intervention to support them.

LEARN Plus and government officials from the Kisarawe district conducting monitoring visits to observe how e-SRP classes and parenting sessions are conducted.



Sereka, the Community Teaching Assistant for the e-SRP at the Vizembe centre, and his pupils display play and learning materials.

Recommendations

The enhanced SRP demonstrated how it can bridge the gap in access to pre-primary education, when a community cannot provide PPE for all of its children. It also demonstrated its effectiveness in improving school readiness and increasing family engagement in children's learning. The program is currently being sustained by communities but threats to longer-term sustainability exist. The LEARN Plus project has the following recommendations to support funders and policymakers with the effective continuity and scaling-up of the program in Tanzania.

1. Scaling this proven education model will enable more children to access pre-primary education and uncover greater evidence around its effectiveness.

The replication of the enhanced SRP across additional communities in Tanzania will help increase access to PPE among disadvantaged children, generate greater evidence on the effectiveness of the program and enhance the uptake of the model by key decision-makers in the country and potentially in other countries in the region that are facing similar challenges. The program should be replicated in communities where existing PPE programming has insufficient capacity. Stakeholders currently implementing the original model of SRP are encouraged to use the enhanced SRP in communities similar to those participating in the LEARN Plus project.

2. Seek proactive and prolonged engagement with local communities to enhance the implementation and sustainability of the enhanced SRP initiative.

Despite the fact that there were community sensitization and mobilization efforts before the commencement of the e-SRP model implementation, findings reveal that community support and parental engagement was limited. This suggests a need for prolonged or ongoing community mobilization. More active involvement from community leaders is also required. They are key actors for successful implementation of the e-SRP centres and so their participation is critical. Sustaining engagement with these stakeholders is important for ensuring program ownership and sustainability once the intervention is complete. It also engages key decision-makers as allies in promoting gender equality and inclusion.



3. Parental engagement sessions should be an integral component of the enhanced SRP program, with stronger focus on gender equality and inclusion and support for the enrolment and retention of children in primary schools.

While parental engagement opportunities offered through the enhanced SRP improved family engagement in learning activities with their children, there is a critical need to strengthen parental awareness of the importance of on-time enrolment and regular attendance in primary school. Maintaining parental engagement sessions in the program will continue to enable parents to better support their children during schooling beyond e-SRP, improve their understanding of the importance of child development and help them to incorporate learning in the home.

Strengthening parental and caregiver knowledge and understanding around key concepts of gender equality and inclusion (GEI) is also needed. It's important to ensure that children can benefit from a gender equitable and inclusive environment, both within and outside of the classroom. This includes encouraging male caregivers to become champions in the promotion of PPE and fostering equal and joint parenting responsibilities. The engagement of fathers will stimulate community awareness on the importance of PPE and lend to the sustainability of the e-SRP centres. Given the lack of significant program impacts on parental attitudes towards GEI in education, future parental sessions should better incorporate and improve upon this key component of the program

One of the community facilitators of the e-SRP at the Sekondari centre facilitating the parenting session to the parents/ caregivers of the children in the centre.

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Students from the e-SRP at the Vizembe centre playing together with their teacher in the classroom.

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