
Jamaica: Recent Initiatives in Early Childhood Policy

*Omar Davies and Rose Davies**

Over the past decade, interest in early childhood education and development has increased in Jamaica. This increased interest has resulted, undoubtedly, from the growing public awareness of the importance of early childhood in development and the potentially positive impact of investing in children's early years.

This expanded knowledge and interest have been bolstered by years of sustained advocacy for early childhood education by various groups within the Jamaican society. During this time, the Government of Jamaica has introduced significant policy initiatives to improve the provision of services for early childhood education and development.

The government's efforts have been multifaceted. They may be grouped into three main areas: institutional and legislative changes to enhance early child development (ECD); improvement of ECD coverage, access, and quality; and greater emphasis on the financing of ECD initiatives.

<p>Institutional and Legislative Changes</p> <p>ECD Coverage, Access, and Quality</p> <p>Financing of ECD Interventions</p>
--

Institutional and Legislative Changes

The Government of Jamaica has taken two significant steps to enhance early childhood education and development in Jamaica. The first, integration of ECD activities within the Ministry of Education and Youth, is an institutional change. The second, establishment of an Early Childhood Commission, is a policy initiative.

* Omar Davies, Ph.D., is Minister of Finance and Planning, Ministry of Finance and Planning, Government of Jamaica; Rose Davies, Ph.D., is Senior Lecturer, Institute of Education, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies.

Integration of ECD Activities

In 1998, the Government of Jamaica took the first significant step—to integrate day-care and preschool activities under the Ministry of Education and Youth. Formerly, these activities were handled by separate ministries.

Integration of the administrative and management structures for these activities enabled the government to harmonize all of the systems relevant to early childhood education and development. These systems include (McDonald 2003):

- Budget formulation
- Standards
- Registration and licensing
- Child admissions
- Supervision
- Subsidies and pay scales
- Training and certification
- Accreditation of training institutions
- Curriculum development
- Monitoring and management information systems
- Evaluation.

Early Childhood Commission

In 2004, the government took the second, and perhaps more significant, step—to establish the Early Childhood Commission. This body oversees the development and overall coordination of national ECD programming and activities.

In September 2004, the government further endorsed this initiative in its announcement of an Education Transformation Program. In a rare example of unanimity in the political directorate, both the government and opposition parties agreed that early childhood education should be an integral part of this new transformation process.

The Early Childhood Commission is an agency of the Ministry of Education and Youth (MOEY). The Commission was mandated by the Early Childhood Commission Act of 2003 in response to the recognized need for a long-term vision and plan for comprehensive delivery of ECD programs and services. Adopting an integrative approach (Samms-Vaughan 2006), the Commission—

- Brings together, under one umbrella, all ECD policies and standards
- Maximizes the use of limited resources by ensuring more cohesive delivery of services.

The Commission states its mission as—“An integrated and coordinated delivery of quality early childhood programs and services which provide equity and access for children 0 to 8 years within healthy, safe, and nurturing environments.” Its functions are listed in box 1.

Box 1. Early Childhood Commission: Legislated Functions

- Advise the Cabinet, through the Minister of Education and Youth, on ECD policy matters
- Assist in preparation of ECD plans and programs
- Monitor and evaluate implementation of ECD plans and programs and make recommendations to the government
- Act as a coordinating agency to streamline ECD activities
- Convene consultations with relevant stakeholders, as appropriate
- Analyze the resource needs of the early childhood sector and make recommendations for budgetary allocations
- Identify alternative financing, through negotiation with donor agencies, and liaise with them to ensure efficient use of the funds provided
- Regulate early childhood institutions
- Conduct research on early child development.

Since establishment of the Commission in 2004, the Jamaican Parliament has ratified supportive legislation, which includes the:

- Child Care and Protection Act
- Early Childhood Act, with its attendant Regulations and Standards.

This legislation ensures that all institutions for early childhood have adequate legal authority to provide for the care and development of Jamaica's children.

ECD Coverage, Access, and Quality

Jamaica is working toward universal coverage and access to ECD services for young children. At the same time, the government is emphasizing the quality of services—focusing, in particular, on the physical infrastructure for ECD programs, the training of ECD practitioners, and the development of appropriate ECD curricula.

Coverage and Access

Ages 3–5 Years

Presently, Jamaica has virtually full ECD coverage for children ages 3–5 years (Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica 2005). The Government of Jamaica plans to achieve universal coverage for this age group by allocating excess space in primary schools to ECD programs for which existing space is inadequate.

Ages 0–3 Years

Day-care coverage for infants and children ages 0–3 years is estimated at 12–15 percent of the entire age group (definitive statistics are not yet available). The government recognizes that focused attention and innovative strategies are needed to increase access to day-care services and to improve the quality of services for children in this age group.

A key government strategy is to continue to support the involvement of community groups and institutions that are already providing ECD services. Many churches, for example, have adjunct basic or preprimary schools. The government will continue to build on these facilities and to strengthen and maintain the roles of these contributors.

This collaborative public–private approach is most cost-effective *and* it deepens grassroots involvement in ECD services—a critical area of national social development.

Quality of ECD Programs

Adequate facilities, well-trained teachers, and appropriate curricula are hallmarks of successful and effective ECD interventions.

Physical Infrastructure

The Government of Jamaica seeks to improve the basic infrastructure (i.e., physical structure and space) of ECD facilities that are supported by various funding sources. Regional and international agencies, as well as local donors and credit institutions, provide support for ECD activities in Jamaica.

Highlighted below are two local, public funds that are supporting improvements in ECD facilities.

Jamaica Social Investment Fund (JSIF). This fund was established under the Ministry of Finance and Planning, in collaboration with the World Bank. The JSIF works with community groups, focusing on small development projects. Perhaps the largest percentage of its funds is allocated for making improvements to basic schools. All requests for funding are generated by community groups. For 2003–04 and 2004–05, the JSIF approved 64 community-initiated projects, for a total cost of approximately US\$9.0 million. These funds were used to improve the quality of facilities and educational programs for more than 20,000 children (Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica 2004, 2005).

CHASE Fund. This fund—for culture, health, arts, sports, and education (specifically, early childhood education)—was created by the Ministry of Finance and Planning and is financed by the allocation of a percentage of Jamaica’s tax on gaming to support programs in the five designated areas. In 2003–04, CHASE donated US\$2.5 million to support 170 projects in early childhood education. In 2004–05, CHASE donated approximately the same amount to support 203 projects (Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica 2004, 2005). These projects, in some instances, involved improvements to facilities.

Training of Practitioners

Integral to the quality of ECD services is the systematic improvement and expansion of training for early childhood teachers. The Government of Jamaica recognizes a critical need to raise the quality of the caring and learning environments for early childhood by improving the skill levels of individuals who deliver the services (Brown 2003). Jamaica’s progress in this regard includes:

- Development and implementation of a well-articulated, competency-based system of training and certification for early childhood practitioners—by Jamaica’s National Council on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (NCTVET) in collaboration with the Early Childhood Commission and other institutions.
- Adoption and publication of *Occupational Standards for Early Childhood Care, Education, and Development* (1998).
- A dramatic increase in access to internationally recognized, certified training programs for early childhood practitioners. Since the 1998 publication of occupational standards, a growing number of individuals have been enrolling in the programs—which are presently offered at three levels (1–3) of National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) certification.
- Continued increase in access to higher-level training (college and university levels, with diploma and/or degree), as local and foreign tertiary institutions establish new training programs in response to the rapidly growing demand for training in early childhood education and development.

Appropriate Curricula

The Government of Jamaica, in partnership with others [nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies] is focusing on development of appropriate ECD curricula for children and for training of teachers. A revised national early childhood curriculum for 3-5 year olds has been piloted in some schools. It is now being reviewed and further revised and should be completed for publication by May 2007. Simultaneously, a curriculum for children ages 3 years and under is being developed.

Financing of ECD Interventions

In 2004–05, 5.1 percent of the overall education budget was allocated to early childhood—an increase from 4.9 percent in the previous year. The allocation included subventions to “recognized” basic schools (i.e., those that have attained a certain level in terms of established standards). The subventions, which are paid directly by the government, cover the salary of at least one teacher in each recognized basic school.

The government acknowledges that 5.1 percent of the education budget is not adequate for early childhood initiatives. The challenge is—

How can Jamaica ensure a more rational reallocation of funds to the ECD sector within the context of existing constraints on the national budget?

Two possible solutions which are emerging as initiatives are to:

- Achieve a more equitable balance in the percentage allocation of the overall recurrent budget for education to the different education levels
- Reallocate surplus resources from Jamaica’s social funds.

Equity in Education Budgets

Currently, the percentage allocation of the total education budget across education levels in Jamaica is 17 percent for tertiary education, 26 percent for secondary education, 30 percent for primary education, and 5 percent for early childhood education. The Government of Jamaica is considering a policy that would decrease the percentage allocated to tertiary education—thereby potentially freeing up funds that could be allocated to early education.

The change in policy would increase the percentage of the cost of tertiary education borne by the beneficiaries of that education. The basis for this policy position is research which demonstrates that, at the tertiary level, investment by an individual is the main factor in increasing individuals' earning capacity over time.

The justification for the proposed adjustment comes with a clear caveat that no qualified student should be denied access to quality tertiary education because of financial constraints. Increasing the loan and grant resources available to tertiary-level students who need support would give substance to this commitment.

Reallocation of Resources from Social Funds

Jamaica has a range of social funds. These include, for example, the:

- National Housing Trust—a compulsory saving scheme to which all employers and employees are required to contribute
- National Insurance Fund—for pensions
- Tourism Enhancement Fund
- National Health Fund
- Education tax
- HEART (Human Employment and Resource Training) Fund.

All of these funds amount to 13 percent of the payroll for employees in Jamaica. In certain instances, surpluses have been built up over the years and could be reallocated without diminishing the support required in target areas.

Under a proposed initiative, education—and, in particular, early childhood and primary education—will be the major beneficiary of a reallocation of social funds. The reallocation would be legislated and would provide the educational sector with a sustained source of funding. The intent is to pass the new pieces of legislation in the 2007/08 legislative year

Conclusion

The Government of Jamaica recognizes that, despite significant developments which have contributed to rapid improvement in early childhood education and development, the country still has not yet achieved the desired level of effort. However, Jamaica has a specific framework within which ECD programs are being implemented—and an objective of gradually improving the overall quality of ECD programming and services.

This framework has been carefully constructed to build on long-standing initiatives by institutions, such as churches and special-interest NGOs, which operate at both national and

community levels. The national government has focused its ECD efforts on improving the quality of services, adopting national standards consistent with international norms, and increasing the level of funding available.

All parties that are interested in early childhood education and development in Jamaica accept the realization that several challenges still have to be addressed. Yet, this work is now a national effort—as demonstrated by the universal support given to the preeminence of early childhood education in the development matrix for Jamaica.

Web Resources [as of November 2006]

Honorable Dr. Omar Davies' e-mail: <hmf@mof.gov.jm>

Rose Davies' e-mail: <rose.davies@uwimona.edu.jm>

References

- Brown, J. 2003. Developing an Early Childhood Profession in the Caribbean. *Caribbean Childhoods: From Research to Action. Volume 1: Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. pp. 54–73.
- Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica*. 2004, 2005. Kingston: Planning Institute of Jamaica.
- McDonald, K. 2003. Making the Whole Greater than the Sum of Its Parts. *Caribbean Childhoods: From Research to Action. Volume 1. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. pp. 93–119.
- Occupational Standards for Early Childhood Care, Education, and Development*. 1998. Kingston, Jamaica: National Council on Technical and Vocational Education and Training, TVET Resource Centre.
- Samms-Vaughan, M. 2006. The Role of the Early Childhood Commission. Regional Conference on Screening, Referral, and Early Intervention. Document. Unpublished paper. Available from the Early Childhood Commission, Kingston, Jamaica.