

Policy Brief

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EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMME: CHILDMINDING PRACTICES IN SEYCHELLES



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Introduction

This brief examines the importance and provision of early learning activities and experiences of young children in the daily operation of the home-based childminding establishments. It focuses on perceptions of childminders and parents, and on direct observations. It draws on the concept of early childhood care and education and considers elements of internationally acknowledged best practices in early childhood education programming in the early formative years - from birth to the age of three. The key findings are presented in the sections below and recommendations for policy consultations and actions are outlined.

Background

The *Global Monitoring Report*, UNESCO (2006) prescribes remedies to enhance children's learning and development, and promotes Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as a major contributor to economic investment and national development. This is possibly in recognition that children's early experiences generate the base for all their subsequent learning and development. Strong early childhood foundations—including good health, nutrition and a nurturing environment—with particular emphasis on early education are good for all future development. Thus, ECCE represents an instrument to

guarantee children's rights, opens the way to all the Education for All (EFA) goals and contributes to the overarching objective to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNESCO, p. 25).

The impetus for ECCE in Seychelles came from the 2010 UNESCO's World Conference on ECCE - '*Building the Wealth of Nations*'. Governments assigned a high priority to the goal of improving access to and quality in early childhood education and care. For this reason, we saw the birth of the Seychelles Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education - '*Winning for Children: A Shared Commitment*' Policy, launched in October 2011. This policy places strong emphasis on the commitment of all sectors and stakeholders in ECCE to strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning. Moreover, it provides the united vision and goals for ECCE and establishes a roadmap for the developments and improvement for all children in the ages of 0 to 7+ years.

Despite this milestone development and achievements in early childhood development over the last two decades, we are still faced with some challenges that require particular attention. One of the main challenges is the absence of clear policy orientation, standards and programmes in support for young children's development - from birth to three years of age—the most crucial foundational stage, in particular the home-based childminding services. This has been echoed in '*The Seychelles Framework for ECCE*' (2011), confirmed in the Country Report on Early Childhood

Development produced by World Bank (2013), reiterated in the National Action Plan for ECCE (2013) as a priority and in the IECDs Cabinet Memorandum (2013) on Child-minding Programme in Seychelles. Specific recommendations were made to develop and implement regulations for inspections as well as comprehensive strategies and programming to assure quality in early childhood learning and development.

Indicators of Early Learning

Research indicated that early childhood learning and development are inextricable. Without a strong foundational programme or guidelines that builds on the international best practice and evidence-based indicators as summarized below, quality and consistency in programme delivery is questionable and successful learning is less likely to follow.

- **Play** is central to early years learning and practice. Despite its fun nature, play cannot be considered a frivolous waste of time, or activity to be put aside for children to focus on real learning. Play stimulates imagination and expands intelligence through interaction and engagement with a range of materials. It develops self-esteem and is a significant factor in brain and muscle development. Play provides unlimited possibilities for learning and development (McCain, Mustard and Shanker, 2007).
- **Learning** is thoughtfully guided and implemented through play-based activities with strong emphasis on social skills, language and communication abilities, integrated with age appropriate and developmental outcomes. (Fraser, 2006). At this age acquisition of knowledge in selected areas is considered less important and should not be compartmentalized. A holistic approach to learning is practiced and greater emphasis is placed on learning to live together and supporting children in their developmental tasks and interests.

- **Environment** should support exploration and interaction both indoor and outdoor that promote children's safe and eager participation. Children need adequate space, appropriate materials and sufficient time to engage in play-based activities. Consider each child's abilities, interests and needs when setting up an encouraging environment. Areas and materials for play related activities reflect developmentally appropriate practices materials and stimulating environments where children can thrive safely
- **Practitioners** and **children** share positive and caring relationships. Adults seek to respect the natural learning strategies of young children, that is, caring through play, spontaneous experiences, interaction, educational activities, self-regulation and personal investigation. Adults are regarded as models for children's learning, skills development and guide new discoveries within safe boundaries in various settings. Also their roles are to focus on helping children build their knowledge, rather than on instructing children. Children are at the heart of all that happens and their individuality are acknowledged and integrated in activities.
- **Parents and families** are viewed as important partners in children's development and learning process. Relationships between parents, children and families are built with frequent positive interactions based on respect and open communication. The rights of parents and the interests of the children are valued.
- **Assessment** is an integral part of effective planning for young children's learning and development. It is important to involve parents in ongoing assessments of their child's learning. Regularly communicates with parents about their child's progress, including interests, abilities and needs observed. Clear documentation gives parents the opportunity to see and understand how practitioners are promoting their child's

learning and development through the provision of purposeful interactions, relationships, environments and experiences.

Quality early learning does not happen by accident. Positive results in high quality programmes happen when programme is planned, specified and integrated (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2000) and child-minders are effectively empowered. When the child-minder or care-giver knows, understands and values her programme and how to implement and plan interactions, relationships, environments and experiences with intention and purpose. This results in positive learning outcomes for children and ensures continuity in their learning from childminding settings to preschool and eventually to compulsory schooling, and where child-minders or care-givers thought of themselves more as facilitators of learning than carers or babysitters.

Source of Data

Data for this brief were derived from two main sources and these were the Childminder and Parent Questionnaires. From the childminder questionnaire, the items looked at issues such as children engagement in educational activities, frequency of outings, equipment and provisions to support learning. From the parent questionnaire, there were three items of interest and these attempted to gauge parents' level satisfaction on availability and quality of educational materials and activities, and on whether the childminder took their children on outings. In cases where rating scale was used, for example, on the frequency of children engagement in educational activities in a typical week, an index was formed by merging the categories "most of the time" and "all the time", and a percentage was computed to provide a measure of how often the activities took place.

Key Findings

Data on the responses of childminders on children's activities, outings, and sources of educational materials were analysed. Parental responses to educational activities were also assessed. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2, and Figures 1.

Children's Activities

As can be observed in **Table 1**, games, the use of toys and drama were the most frequently used educational activities. In the use of games, it can also be seen that there was quite a wide variation across regions, ranging from 47 percent in the West to 100 percent in the Islands. When it came to storytelling as a form educational engagement only childminders in the South/East produced a reasonable result at 60 percent. A national average of just under 30 percent shows that this form of engagement was minimal. The same can be said on the use of drawing/painting and water or sand play. For the latter, it can be observed that this was not promoted at all by childminders in the North and West.

Table 1: Children engagement in educational activities in a typical week by region (percentage)

Region	Games	Drama	Story telling	Watching TV	Painting/ Drawing	Water or sand play	Blocks /Lego	Toys
Central 1	81	73	28	80	27	8	54	85
Central 2	80	52	16	68	16	4	60	80
South and East	85	80	60	26	66	23	60	54
Islands	100	81	23	50	39	12	58	73
North	67	47	7	73	27	0	53	67
West	47	53	16	74	16	0	47	74
Seychelles	78	67	29	58	35	10	55	71

It is pleasing to note that some form of educational activities is being practiced in childminding establishments. However, we would have expected higher results for story-telling, drawing, and use of blocks and lego - these are pre-requisite activities for the development of language, cognition, and fine motor skills and perhaps childminder are not equipped to prepare children for pre-school readiness. It was not expected that water or sand play would feature at all. However, it is one of the requirements in advanced countries such as UK for all registered childminders. But it is encouraging that some childminders are making the effort to provide such facilities.

Outings and Outdoor Activities

Outings and outdoor activities also play an integral part in the child's overall development. These can encourage children to explore, appreciate and respect their environment and stimulate their creative and intellectual capacity. Frequency of outings and factors considered as barriers are presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Frequency of and barriers to taking children on outings by region (percentage)

Region	Frequency of outings	Parent awareness of frequency of outing	Barriers to taking children on outings					
			Transport	Distance from main road	Cost	Age of children	No assistant or helper	Personal commitments
Central 1	12	16	62	27	65	50	46	19
Central 2	4	12	64	42	65	73	62	39
South/East	14	6	63	57	20	31	77	54
Islands	6	15	29	23	27	39	39	31
North	7	6	33	20	27	53	60	13
West	5	9	79	16	63	74	74	37
Seychelles	9	12	57	34	44	51	60	35

As presented in **Table 2**, it can be seen that outings were seldom organized for children by childminders. The national average in this case was only nine percent. However, the results are confirmed by the responses of parents; most parents indicated that they

were unaware of such outings or visits -the national average in this case was only 12 percent.

As can also be observed, a variety of factors were given as barriers to taking children on outings, among which the unavailability of an assistant or helper, the age of the children and transport. The general impression which can be drawn from those results is that outing does not form an integral part of the childminder's educational programme and the barriers stated may be reflecting a lack of knowledge of the importance of such an activity.

Source of Educational Materials

In order for childminders to operate learning programmes effectively, access to appropriate resources is an important issue. Childminders have complained of difficulties in sourcing educational materials and toys; they complain that their provisions are limited since they do not have the financial means for procurement. Therefore, they seek for possible assistants from various sources and the more affluent parent can be a provider. Childminders were asked about donations from different sources and the results are displayed in Figure 1.

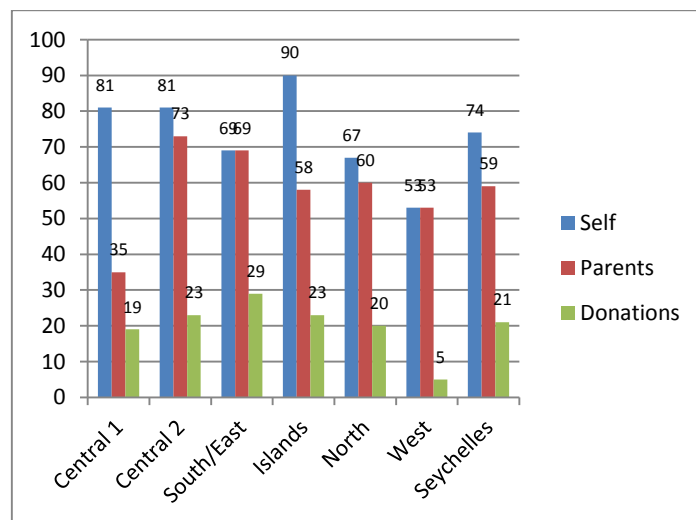


Figure 1: Percentage of childminders indicating different sources of provisions of educational materials by region

Among the three main sources of provision of educational materials or toys, parents and childminders themselves appeared to be the main providers. Childminders were the main provider across regions with a high percentage in Central 1 and Central 2 (81%) and Islands (90%) there was some variability in the figures for parents as a source, ranging from 35 percent in Central 1 to 73 percent in Central 2 - perhaps indicating that location and convenience may be factors. It would have been expected that childminders would be able to make use of donation to access educational materials, however, the results show that this is not the case. In fact, very low figures were recorded for donations across regions and West region (with a figure of 5%) was really disadvantaged. With the national emphasis on ECCE this may be an area for Corporate Social Responsibility initiative.

Summary of Findings

Three main issues emerge from these findings:

- Children in childminding establishments are missing out on the building blocks for learning in a conducive learning environment.
- Generally, outings does not form part of the childminders learning programme.
- Additional educational resources are being provided mainly by the childminder herself and some parents.

Recommendations

- Develop an early learning framework 0-3 years based on international best practice and address local context and challenges;
- Promote play as the primary method for early learning and language development;

- Establish support structures for childminders to access relevant resources and materials to enhance early learning environment and development;
- Consider how to address the existing gap in capacity and quality of provision for childminders.

Conclusion

This brief examined the extent to which early learning was promoted in the operations of childminding providers. The results suggest that childminders were engaging children in learning activities through the use of creative activities. However, other forms of activities involving play should also be promoted in a least restricted environment and outings for children should be organized as an essential ingredient in early learning. The childminder plays a leading role in providing early learning experiences for the children. However, the critical role of the parents should not be overshadowed. It would be ideal for both parents and childminders to share the same vision in providing a winning headstart for lifelong learning.

References

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- Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNESCO)
- National Action Plan for Early Childhood Care and Education (2013)
- The Seychelles Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (2011)

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EFA	Education for All
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals

