Review of ChildFund—supported ECD programmes

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This review was an undertaking commissioned by ChildFund International as part of its commitment to quality ECD programming in collaboration with ChildFund New Zealand. It was carried out in cooperation with the Education specialist and other staff of ChildFund Timor-Leste and ChildFund New Zealand. We regarded our expertise as complementary. We have expertise and experience in research and evaluation in curriculum, policy frameworks for quality early childhood education and integrated ECD provision. ChildFund staff understand Child Fund-supported ECD within local historical, social and cultural contexts, and have expertise related to their various positions and backgrounds. ChildFund Timor-Leste staff provided input about suitability of the review research instruments and interpretation from a social and cultural perspective—this was essential for this review to be valid and useful. They facilitated various briefing meetings, organised all the visits to ECD centres, homebased ECD services, and interviews with parents, teachers, local partners, NGOs, and Ministry of Education staff, drove and accompanied us on our trips and interpreted for us. They provided statistics and useful background material and were always helpful. Finally, they have provided valuable feedback and critique on the draft report.

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We acknowledge Margaret Carr, who acted as an advisor and provided critical feedback on the design, analysis and writing of this review. Thanks to Margaret Drummond for her help in putting together the report.

Cover Photograph: Children performing actions to the watermelon song at Raime homebased ECD service in Liquica.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review was commissioned by ChildFund International as part of its commitment to quality ECD programming in collaboration with ChildFund New Zealand. The main aim of the review was to analyse the strengths of the programme and identify challenges that need to be addressed for a more effective and holistic ECD intervention. The review was undertaken in collaboration with the Education specialist and other staff of ChildFund Timor Leste and ChildFund New Zealand.

The review questions were about access to centre-based and homebased ECD programmes by children aged 3–5 years, quality of ECD programmes supported by ChildFund Timor Leste, availability of age-appropriate curriculum and learning materials, quality of teachers, participation of parents and community members through PTAs, and partnerships with the Ministry of Education at district and national levels. An overall aim was to review ChildFund’s ability to foster holistic ECD programmes and their integration with nutrition and health services.

The project investigated these questions through observations to assess the quality of programming and interviews with parents and teachers/facilitators in four ECD centres and three homebased ECD services in six districts of Timor Leste. Primary school teaching staff, ChildFund partners and Ministry of Education staff in two of these districts were interviewed. At national level, interviews and discussions were held with ChildFund Timor Leste staff, Ministry of Education officials responsible for pre-schools, and staff from UNICEF, Plan International, World Vision, Alola Foundation and the Institute of Mary McKillop. Consideration of successful international models informed the review.

This executive summary gives an overview of the strengths of the programmes and models and components that are working successfully in the Timor Leste context, as well as challenges and issues.

KEY FINDINGS

The focus of ChildFund on ECD as a holistic and integrated concept is working well in the Timor Leste context. ChildFund’s three integrated strands are set out in the design framework below, and show the intended interweaving of its ECD care and education programmes, opportunities to access health and nutrition, and parent education and support. In this way, ChildFund is able to bring together interdisciplinary supports to provide holistic services for children and families who are facing challenges, focusing on critical issues of health, nutrition and stimulation of learning and development.

Figure 1: Life Stage 1 Design Framework

Services for young children and their families that are integrated to provide an accessible and comprehensive range of services are internationally recognised as successful and valuable forms of provision. They recognise the ways in which children’s learning, identity and wellbeing are embedded within family and community contexts; development in one sphere has repercussions for development in other spheres. Integrated services are able to provide wider possibilities for learning, development and support for children and families than standalone education services. ChildFund adopts a community-based empowerment approach to integration, collaborating with local partners, community teams and District Health Services. It is a leader in the provision of ECD that is focused on children (child friendly), extends opportunities for parent support as educators of their children, and supports adults’ own learning. ChildFund should maintain this valuable approach and continue to work with and enhance community collaborations and partnerships.
In particular, within local communities ChildFund could discuss ways to link ECD centres and homebased ECD services with District Health Services. For example, mobile health services could be extended to offer worthwhile opportunities for children and families to access health services at their local ECD setting.

ChildFund Timor Leste is playing a significant role in offering access to ECD for deprived and vulnerable children aged 0–5 years. Its ECD centres and homebased ECD services are located in the most deprived communities in Timor Leste, where ChildFund has sponsorship programmes. These are inclusive of all families, including children with special educational needs. In future, a greater range of statistical information about operation, child attendance and staffing would be useful to enable an analysis of the picture of provision and operation, inform planning and provide data for the Ministry of Education.

Both ECD centres and homebased ECD services have a valuable place in ECD provision in Timor Leste, and are well on the way to providing developmental stimulation and an age and developmentally appropriate curriculum. Literacy and numeracy are strongly emphasised. Homebased ECD services are worthwhile provisions in their own right, offering opportunities for children to socialise and take part in learning activities, and parents to be involved in their children’s learning. A pressing need for ECD centres is to train teachers and facilitators in teaching strategies to encourage exploration and play. Alongside such training, teachers and facilitators should be encouraged to move away from lengthy whole class teaching to spending more time with children in small groups and play activities as seen in one exemplar highlighted in the report. Greater use could be made of parent and community volunteers to work in the education programme alongside the teacher, to support parent education and to explore opportunities to add more local cultural songs and stories. Training and professional support is needed for facilitators in homebased ECD services. A second need is to improve the number and variety of educational resources and the external and internal environments. Volunteers could contribute to this work. It is expected that proposed work to review the pre-school curriculum, and the accompanying teachers’ manual and teaching guidelines, will provide a good framework on which to base practice. ChildFund should continue to collaborate with the Ministry of Education over its revision of the 2003 pre-school curriculum and teachers’ manual and make use of these documents in its programmes when they become available.

The starting age for ECD allows children to have two or three years’ ECD before school. The 2½ hours per day five days per week being offered fall within a range that benefits children, provided the ECD is of good quality and children attend for these hours. We suggest that ChildFund prioritise continuing to strengthen its collaborations with families and community and enhancing quality of provision over increasing hours.

Teachers and facilitators were eager to have access to good quality teacher training, particularly about teaching methodologies and strategies, especially child-centred methods and learning through play. Current pre-service training and professional development opportunities are limited, and participants (teachers and participants from external organisations) held concerns about the quality and relevance of the training provided by INFORDEPE and of the pre-school teachers’ training manual.

ChildFund parents are encouraged to play an active role in PTAs and some undertake voluntary work for homebased ECD services and ECD centres. ChildFund has prioritised as important the development of strong partnerships with parents and these are supporting parents’ learning and enabling parents to make contributions to ECD that enhance opportunities for children, and help parents to learn about activities to undertake at home. Cooperation and work with schools, local partners and NGOs is a strength. In combination, these support the holistic development of children and are empowering.

ChildFund’s participation as an active partner on the ECD working group is highly regarded, including by UNICEF, whose key function is to support the government. ECD needs to be inscribed in the government’s national framework so that it is fully supported, all teachers become paid by the Ministry of Education and ECD services remain sustainable after NGOs have left. We would encourage ChildFund to continue to work with other providers offering ECD, local partners and NGOs to formulate specific actions that might be supported on a collective basis.

The recommendations emerging from this review are set out in the next section. The energy and motivation of ChildFund staff, teachers, facilitators and parents is the greatest resource that will contribute to the enhancement of ChildFund ECD services. The strengths of ChildFund’s ECD programme lie in its holistic approach to children and families, and its community-based empowerment model. ChildFund can play a lead role as a contributing partner with the Timor Leste government, other governments and donor organisations in designing and implementing ECD programmes. It has commitment, capacity and current reach in terms of ECD service delivery in Timor Leste. Many challenges and issues are apparent, and progress will be made.
by ChildFund working continuing to work systematically through these, in collaboration with government, local partners and other NGOs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

HOLISTIC AND INTEGRATED ECD INTERVENTIONS/SERVICES

We recommend that ChildFund continue to focus on ECD as a holistic and integrated concept since this is working well in the Timor-Leste context and is an internationally successful and valuable model of provision for children and families. The community-based empowerment model is a strength of ChildFund’s approach. ChildFund might enhance integration through

- building teachers’ and facilitators’ understanding about the value of involving parents in their child’s learning;
- sharing important child development concepts with parents;
- providing exemplars and guidance on effective parent participation and education support in practice; and
- piloting the extension of the range of services offered alongside ECD according to the needs and wishes of the community. This could be through partnering with other organisations.

ChildFund could be a leader in the provision of ECD that consolidates integrated provision focused on children (child friendly), extends opportunities for parent support as educators of their children and supports adults’ own learning.

DEVELOPMENTAL STIMULATION, AGE AND DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE CURRICULUM

The ECD centres and homebased ECD services are on the way to providing developmental stimulation and an age and developmentally appropriate curriculum. The most pressing needs are to train teachers and facilitators in teaching strategies to encourage exploration and play. Alongside such training, teachers and facilitators should be encouraged to move away from lengthy whole class teaching to spending more time with children in small groups and play activities as seen in the exemplar. Greater use could be made of parent and community volunteers to improve adult:child ratios and to explore opportunities to add more local cultural songs and stories. It is expected that proposed work to review the pre-school curriculum, and the accompanying teachers’ manual and teaching guidelines, will provide a good framework on which to base practice. We recommend that ChildFund find ways to

- provide access to training for teachers and facilitators in child-friendly teaching techniques that encourage children’s exploration, play and problem solving;
- preview the practice of teaching children in whole class activities for extended periods of time and provide exemplars and workshops on small group and play activities (activity corners or areas as they are known) that support children’s learning;
- end the practice that children are required to sit and pass a final examination. It encourages an inappropriately low expectation by teachers and adults and influences relationships;
- consider the value of recruiting and training parent volunteers to work in ECD centres alongside the teacher;
- continue the practice of teaching in the local dialect, alongside teaching in Tetum and Portuguese;
- consider inviting local elders to tell the stories and songs of the local culture so that these are passed on to children. These could perhaps be recorded and made into books; and
- consider what outcomes for children are valued in the Timor-Leste context, and whether longer term outcomes of becoming a motivated learner and children taking responsibility for their own learning are important.
The second pressing need is to improve the number and variety of educational resources and the external and internal environments. We recommend that ChildFund explore ways to

- improve the number and variety of learning resources. Consideration could be given to providing workshops aimed at supporting teachers and facilitators to make use of natural and recycled resources within the education programme; for example, plastic bottles filled with stones or nuts for musical instruments, paint made from mango bark, and sticks and leaves used for construction and counting.
- develop the outside play areas and make inside environments more comfortable where this is needed. The goodwill and support of parents and the community could be harnessed to provide locally made matting for bare concrete floors, tidy and remove any dangerous objects from playgrounds, plant fruit trees and vegetable gardens in the grounds (with the children’s participation) and make other environmental improvements.
- connect ECD centres to a water supply if possible and ensure the outside environment is kept clear of safety hazards.

We recommend that

- ChildFund should continue to collaborate with the Ministry of Education over its revision of the 2003 pre-school curriculum and teachers’ manual and make better use of these documents in its programmes when they become available; and
- make professional development available to teachers and facilitators when the revised curriculum is published.

**FREQUENCY AND INTENSITY OF ECD SERVICES PROVIDED**

The starting age for ECD allows children to have two or three years ECD before school. The 2½ hours per day being offered fall within a range that benefits children, provided the ECD is of good quality and children attend for these hours. We recommend that ChildFund prioritise continuing to strengthen its collaborations with families and community and enhancing quality of provision over increasing hours.

**DATA COLLECTION AND MONITORING**

We recommend that ChildFund review its information needs in relation to its strategic objectives and the usefulness of gathering further annual information about

- the funding of its ECD services;
- operating times and capacity of ECD services;
- attendance data (as well as enrolment);
- the ages, ethnicities, and hours per week of children attending (as well as numbers and gender); and
- training levels of teachers and volunteer facilitators, including in-service training (see recommendations on core and technical competencies of tutors/teachers).

Secondly, that ChildFund support its services to provide EMIS data to the Ministry of Education annually in order that baseline and ongoing statistics are available about pre-school provision across the country, and lobby for future data gathering by the Ministry of Education to include information about ECD provision.

**CORE AND TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES OF TEACHERS AND HOMEBASED ECD PROVIDERS**

We recommend that ChildFund

- investigate developing teacher profiles that record on an ongoing basis the training and professional development that ChildFund-supported teachers and facilitators have undergone. From these profiles, discussions with teachers and observations of their practice, a needs assessment could be developed and future professional development targeted at gaps in their experience and competencies.
• investigate the logistics of ECD centre teachers and experienced homebased facilitators accessing specialist training, and professional development workshops provided by other NGOs who specialise in child-centred teacher training and have made it part of their core business, for example, the Institute of Mary McKillop or Alola Foundation; and
• advocate on a national level for the introduction of pre-service teacher education for ECD teachers and lobby for changes to the current pre-school teachers training programme run by INFORDEPE and the associated curriculum guidelines and teachers’ manual.

PARTICIPATION OF PARENTS AND OTHER COMMUNITY MEMBERS
ChildFund parents are encouraged to play an active role in PTAs and some undertake voluntary work for homebased ECD services and ECD centres. Cooperation and work with schools, local partners and NGOs is a strength. We recommend that

• ChildFund continue to prioritise the development of strong partnerships with parents through formal structures and informal volunteer work as a way of enhancing ECD centres and homebased ECD services; and
• ChildFund continue to work collaboratively with schools, local partners and NGOs, sharing expertise and undertaking collective advocacy for ECD.

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
We would encourage ChildFund to work with other providers offering ECD, local partners and NGOs to formulate specific actions that they want inscribed within the national ECD framework and that might be supported on a collective basis. The government’s pivotal role is to lead pre-school and ECD provision and expansion including ensuring quality standards. Our review findings suggest the following are core areas for advocacy:

• encouraging the government to consult in a meaningful way with ChildFund and other NGOs throughout its policy development and implementation;
• advocacy for the government to gather and analyse annual statistical data on enrolments and staffing in ECD centres and homebased ECD services;
• improving the quality of government-provided teacher training;
• supporting the access of ECD teachers and homebased ECD facilitators to good quality teacher training and in-service training;
• implementation of a proposed accreditation system for training providers;
• ensuring curriculum revisions are supported by professional development and resources available to ECD teachers and facilitators;
• monitoring and evaluation by government of ECD programmes;
• improving the funding of ECD services;
• adopting responsibility for the remuneration of teachers and volunteer teachers; and
• encouraging the government to extend its school feeding programme to ECD centres and homebased ECD services.
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INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the Early Years Research Centre, University of Waikato, was contracted to undertake a review of ChildFund-supported ECD programmes in Timor-Leste. The review was commissioned by ChildFund International as part of its commitment to quality ECD programming in collaboration with ChildFund New Zealand. The main aim of the review was to analyse the strengths of the programme and identify challenges that need to be addressed for a more effective and holistic ECE intervention. The review was undertaken in collaboration with the Education specialist and other staff of ChildFund Timor-Leste and ChildFund New Zealand.

In February 2013, we gathered the following data to assess the quality of programming in four ECD centres and three home-based ECD services in six districts of Timor-Leste. Observations of activities and interactions were made to assess aspects of quality, using a common rating scale. The ratings gathered information about the environment, availability of curriculum resources and learning materials, interactions and the education programme. Programme plans were discussed with teachers/facilitators, and interviews were carried out with parents and teachers/facilitators. Interviews were held with school teaching staff, ChildFund partners and Ministry of Education staff in two of these districts. At national level, interviews and discussions were held with ChildFund Timor-Leste staff, Ministry of Education officials responsible for pre-schools, and staff from UNICEF, Plan International, World Vision, Alola Foundation and the Institute of Mary McKillop. Details of the methodology used in this review are available on request from the University of Waikato.

The review covers access to centre-based and home-based ECD programmes by children aged 3–5 years, quality of ECD programmes supported by ChildFund Timor-Leste, availability of age-appropriate curriculum and learning materials, quality of teachers, participation of parents and community members through PTAs, and partnerships with the Ministry of Education at district and national levels. Another focus is the ability to foster holistic ECD programmes and to integrate with nutrition and health services.

Data was analysed to highlight the strengths of the programmes as a basis for considering specific models or components that are successfully working in the Timor-Leste context. Some aspects of ECD programmes were documented as exemplars. Recommendations emerging from analysis of data were evaluated in relation to international benchmarks of quality, access and participation and integrated working relationships, and views of participants about challenges and future directions.

ChildFund New Zealand staff discussed a draft of the review report with ChildFund Timor-Leste staff. This final review report incorporates feedback from this discussion.

BACKGROUND

The ChildFund Timor-Leste country strategy paper, 2011–2016 discusses the background for infants and children aged 0–5 in Timor-Leste and the rationale for its approach to ECD (ChildFund Timor-Leste, 2011). It highlights that

Against the backdrop of low human development, limited socio-economic growth and high poverty, children and youth in Timor-Leste experience processes and conditions of deprivation, exclusion and vulnerability (DEV) across the life stage … for infants and children aged 0–5, the priority DEV issues are limited basic health care and early childhood development offering them very limited ‘head start’ and exposing them to early poverty. (p. 1)

Its area for programme focus for this age group is on the care and development of infants and young children aged 0–5. It has three integrated strands, set out below in its design framework.
An education programme is carried out through ECD centres (pre-schools) and homebased ECD services (playgroups) and capacity building for parent teacher associations (PTAs). A health programme for 0–5 age groups offers a range of services including community-based services of trained community health volunteers in villages, support to the District Health Service for a range of treatment, preventative and education functions, support to the government-initiated SiSCas (integrated community health services), supplementary feeding for pre-primary children, provision of community-based clean water and sanitation facilities, and improvement of home gardening productivity. In this way, ChildFund is able to bring together interdisciplinary teams to provide holistic supports for children and families who are facing challenges.

The work of ChildFund is being undertaken alongside the Timor-Leste government’s education work. A vision for pre-school education is set out in the Timor-Leste government’s December 2012 Policy framework for pre-school education: Weaving a tais for children in Timor-Leste. This document is still to be finalised by government ministers.

Pre-school education programs address all aspects of children’s development (social-emotional, language, cognitive and physical) and provide a solid foundation for the child’s success in early primary school. Positive benefits for children enrolled in quality programs include: positive self-concept and resiliency; communication and emergent literacy skills; critical thinking for decision-making and problem solving; skills, attitudes to construct their own knowledge; and an ability to interact well with children and adults. (Republica Democrática de Timor-Leste, 2012)

**IDENTIFYING THE STRENGTHS AND GAPS OF ECD PROVISION**

**REACHING THE MOST DEPRIVED AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN AGED 0–5 YEARS OLD IN TERMS OF ACCESS**

The terms of reference asked the researchers to look into the ability to reach the most deprived and vulnerable children aged 0–5 years old in terms of having access to both centre-based and homebased ECD. ChildFund Timor-Leste has located ECD projects in six districts that have been prioritised because of their high rates of deprivation, exclusion and vulnerability (DEV). The districts are Lautem, Manatuto, Liquica, Bobonaro, Covalima and Dili and are districts where ChildFund has been serving under sponsorship programmes. Targeting communities is a good way to promote access for vulnerable children. It utilises scarce resources with good effect and allows ChildFund to build a network of ECD programmes that can be supported and strengthened using coordinated district resources and collaboration, especially with local partners.

ChildFund Timor-Leste is playing a significant role in offering access to ECD for deprived and vulnerable children aged 0–5 years. A strength of ChildFund is its ability to establish homebased ECD and construct ECD centres in collaboration with partners and in consultation with community. ChildFund provides 76 ECD services, 39 ECD centres and 37 homebased ECD. In the year January to December 2012, a total of 3,404 children were enrolled. The percentage of children aged 0–5 who were attending ECD in the districts covered ranged from 2% in Liquica to 15% in Graca. However, there were no figures on the capacity of ECD centres, their hours per week and weeks per year of operation.
ChildFund ECD services are inclusive of all the families in the community, taking both sponsored children and children from the local community. Parents and teachers said that children with special needs are welcomed and included, and we saw acceptance and welcoming of children of all ages in the homebased ECD services. According to the OECD, the inclusion of children in universal programmes seems to be the most effective way to provide programmes, since isolating and targeting children who have been categorised as having special needs can separate and stigmatise them (OECD, 2006, p. 214). ChildFund’s universal acceptance and welcoming of all families and its focus on providing ECD centres and homebased ECD services in particular localities is a sound approach.

Ministry of Education national and district staff all expressed their views that it is crucial that close connections between ChildFund and the Ministry of Education and community consultation over the provision and ongoing operation of ECD centres continue. Such collaboration helps ensure that ECD centres are sustainable, that they are placed where they are needed, that community members see that local government is supportive, and that in the long term, the government can take over the centres.

ChildFund must walk together with the government. If ChildFund does not work with the Ministry of Education, the community will say this is a project of ChildFund and they won’t bring their children. (Ministry of Education)

The Ministry of Education does not hold national statistics on the number of children by age, location and demographic characteristics, or information about their attendance at ECD centres, homebased ECD or pre-school classes. Its current focus is on pre-school and pre-primary, not ECD, and it is in the process of developing a database for children in pre-school classes. The lack of statistics means that it is not possible to provide meaningful analysis of ChildFund’s access and provision within a national picture. One recommendation of the OECD review of ECEC in 20 countries (OECD, 2006) is for “administrations to organise data collection and monitoring in the field more energetically” (p. 15) so that policy can be well informed and realistic. This is a challenge for the Ministry of Education and for ChildFund Timor-Leste. It is important for ChildFund to support its programmes to provide Education Management Information System (EMIS) data to the Ministry of Education annually in order that baseline and ongoing statistics are available about pre-school provision across the country.

**PROVIDING HOLISTIC AND INTEGRATED ECD IN BOTH CENTRE AND HOMEBASED**

ChildFund’s model of ECD is for holistic and integrated ECD services to be provided. Development of such services is an international trend that recognises the ways in which children’s learning, identity and wellbeing are embedded within family and community contexts. Integrated services are able to provide wider possibilities for learning, development and support for children and families than stand-alone education services (Bennett, 2006; OECD, 2001; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). The influential *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* case studies highlighted the importance for children’s learning of their “home learning environment” (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010). Integrated ECD services are in a strong position to influence the home learning environment through their holistic connections with parents and families.

The holistic and integrated approach taken by ChildFund to ECD enables it to attend to the context of family lives, focusing on critical issues in Timor-Leste of poor nutrition, health, and education. Poverty is a cross-cutting problem that needs to be tackled on a broad governmental front, but one where the collaborative partnerships of ChildFund can play a role.

**1. Parent education support**

Developmental stimulation and parent education support are core functions of ECD that the ECD centres and homebased ECD services we observed were on the way to providing well.

Parent education support and parents working with teachers and facilitators were developed features of most of the ECD centres and particularly of ECD homebased provision. Ministry of Education district staff who were interviewed regarded parenting awareness as a real strength of ChildFund’s ECD programme. Positive effects for children, families and the education programme occur through parents and teachers working together in the interests of children. Children who see their parents and teachers working closely together “gain a sense of continuity and being cared for” and “experience a trusting and secure environment in which
they can learn and grow” (Whalley & the Pen Green Centre Team, 2007, p. 7). Children’s learning and wellbeing is supported where there are strong connections and consistency between education settings and the child’s home.

A striking feature of our interviews with parents was their high aspirations for their children’s education and their country. They wanted their children to be educated and to make productive contributions to life in Timor-Leste.

We as parents, we hope in the future our child will be a good person of use in this country who can do something good in this country. We want our children to be diligent and they are people already, to make it as people. (HB father)

That my children will study in pre-school and finish school, attend university and become useful for this country. (ECD centre mother)

A good bright future for our children and for this country. (ECD centre mother)

The commitment of parents to their children’s education is a powerful impetus for parents to become involved if they know that they too can help their children learn at home and support the ECD programme. Our interviews with parents and teachers and observations of the ECD services showed very valuable parent education was occurring through 1) parent participation in the ECD programme and 2) parent education workshops. Through participation in the programme and discussion with the teacher and their child, parents developed ideas about what they could do at home to support their children’s learning, and how to prepare their child for school.

Parents also can learn about different colours, how to draw, paint, spending time with children, imitating the teacher and continuing to sing songs at home. (HB parent)

Parents learn new songs and history they can apply back home. (HB father)

When the children finish school, we ask what the teacher told them and they practise in the home. (ECD centre parent)

We learn about the importance of education and how parents can prepare children and bring children to school. (ECD centre parent)

Some parents gained learning for themselves alongside their child in the programme or in a workshop.

We also learn about alphabet and things because some of us are illiterate. (HB parent)

A parenting session on catechism for the [local] village. (ECD centre parent)

The following example shows parents learning from taking part in activities in the ECD programmes.

**Homebased ECD services**

In two of the three homebased ECD services, parents not only remained with their children, they also took part in activities with them. Through this participation they contributed to the children’s education and became familiar with activities they might do with their children at home. Here is a description of a drawing activity in one homebased ECD.

Children sat on the floor in three circles. The facilitator showed them the template drawn on a piece of paper for each child and gave directions about how to colour it in. Parents sat behind the children, showed interest and verbally encouraged them to participate. At times a parent guided a child’s hand in holding the pencil and colouring the picture in. A small girl watched two bigger children intently and copied their actions.

In the other homebased ECD:

Parents and older children join children in play—bouncing small balls, joining bricks together, sharing toys/equipment between children. They sing along, join actions. Many parents are engaged with younger children on the perimeter of the mat. They nod and smile as newcomers arrive, intervene where necessary, watch intently and invite shy children to join in.
In one ECD centre, volunteer parents were helped to work alongside teachers and contribute to their own and the children’s learning.

**ECD centres**

In all but one of the ECD centres, most parents stayed outside the classroom during the structured teaching time, watching the children through the window or talking together, often with younger children. Because parents were close by, they were able to support the child’s transition to ECD and in some cases a parent sat with or near their child in the classroom, providing help in settling. An older girl was observed leading a younger boy outside to find his parent when the child became upset. One ECD centre, rated most highly on all dimensions, was exceptional in terms of parent involvement in the education programme. In this centre, six volunteer parents came into the classroom and remained to help throughout the session, working alongside the teacher. They had talked with the teacher about their role and she had offered them ideas on how to support children. These parents took an active role during small group activities, helping the children to cut out shapes and colour them in.

One spinoff from such direct engagement in these ECD services is that parents are better equipped to guide and encourage their children at home because they have done this in the ECD. This is powerful learning.

Some parents said they would like ECD centres to provide a wider range of opportunities for themselves and their children in addition to the core function of early childhood education. These went beyond education for parenting.

 Aside from learning and education, this centre could provide English and computer courses for parents, because our children are small and training centres are far to access by motorbike or minivan (HB father).

The possibility of offering learning opportunities for parents as well as children is an international trend that governments are supporting in many developed countries, including the UK, Australia and Canada. An internationally famous centre, the Pen Green Centre for under fives and their families, which is located in a low socioeconomic community in England, has built on a long tradition of parent involvement to develop opportunities for parents (Whalley & the Pen Green Centre Team, 2007). It shares important child development concepts with parents, supports parents as educators of their children, and has organised a variety of training opportunities and support for parents, including teacher training and support groups. ChildFund can be seen as taking a socio-cultural position that recognises that development is always embedded in particular contexts. ChildFund ECD services connect with the wider contexts of family, culture and society.

**ii. Home visits**

Teachers and facilitators described carrying out home visits for recruitment, relationship building with families, parent awareness about ECD and checking on children’s non-attendance. A focus in home visits was to reach children who were not participating in ECD:

 I am trying to reach excluded children but some parents are working in farming so can’t bring children. Grandparents are coming with children sometimes.

Another homebased facilitator described home visits as being important for her to develop relationships with parents and family first before she built relationships with the child/children.

There is further potential for home visits if time is available to teachers and facilitators especially with DEV children and their families.

**iii. Teaching about health and nutrition**

Teaching about health and nutrition was included as a regular part of planned programmes. Several ECD centres had an annual calendar of themes/topics that supported teachers in their programme planning. Health and nutrition was to be the theme in March, following February’s theme of love and friendship. For example,
a homebased facilitator explained that the topic for March was to be health and being a healthy person and that she would be clarifying illnesses and discussing clean teeth, cuts and sores with the children throughout the month.

Teachers and facilitators regularly talked to children and parents during parent education sessions. Several said they would like more training/professional development about health and nutrition.

The government’s school feeding programme has not been extended to pre-schools, something that parents, teachers and facilitators would like. They argued that a “school feeding programme” would make the ECD more attractive so the children would want to come. We heard from one of the ECD centres that was not waiting for the government to provide food, but taking the initiative in offering food on a regular basis, with PTA mothers rostered to provide a “school-feeding programme” two days a week. Parents said this was working well and providing an incentive for them and other parents to come with their children.

Water and toilet facilities were absent in some centres. In one setting we visited, a toilet block was located between the village chief’s office and adjacent to the ECD centre but the children and teachers were not allowed to use this facility.

iv. Community-based protection

It is our understanding that in each village/sub-village there is someone assigned as the person responsible for child protection. Several ChildFund/local partner staff identified that children attending ECD programmes was an example of their community-based child protection focus.

DEVELOPMENTAL STIMULATION, AVAILABILITY OF APPROPRIATE CURRICULUM AND LEARNING MATERIALS

In order to find out about developmental stimulation and the availability of age and developmentally appropriate curriculum and learning materials, we carried out observations over a morning of the teaching and learning in the seven ECD services that we visited. We asked teachers about the curriculum they used, the activities they provided for learning and their planning and assessment processes. We also found out about the languages spoken within the programme.

The observations were done using a rating scale that required the observer to make a judgement about the quality of the curriculum resources and learning materials, the nature and quality of interactions between the teacher and children and among children, whether children are engaged and concentrating on learning, and the education programme. The items in the rating scale are related to different aspects of the learning environment associated in research evidence internationally with outcomes for children and have been used in New Zealand evaluations.

We recognise that the researchers come from a country where the ECE curriculum values a model of teaching and learning that includes both transmission and interactive strategies. This is because some of the outcomes that are valued in New Zealand (and supported by the international literature) are embedded in reciprocal interactions—children thinking creatively, expressing an opinion and evaluating their own learning. This is a cultural matter.

The rating scale items that we used cover

- adult interactions that are responsive;
- children supporting and cooperating with each other, co-constructing learning and showing leadership;
- children showing concentration and engagement;
- aspects of the education programme and interactions focusing on early literacy, mathematical understanding, problem solving and creativity; and
- learning resources.

We also observed (through our interpreter) the languages spoken—local dialect, Tetum and Portuguese.
Responsive interactions

At all seven settings, the average quality rating for “adult interactions are responsive” was around the medium mark (i.e., these interactions happened some of the time), and some were higher (the interactions happened much of the time). Adults welcomed children when they arrived, helped children come into the class/group and were quick to notice children’s needs and respond to them. Adults encouraged participation through modelling and demonstrating to children to support their learning. This was displayed beautifully in group singing where teachers and children enthusiastically sang and carried out actions. Singing was well developed in all the classes we visited. Parents were highly appreciative of the quality of their teachers and the warmth of their interactions.

We have a good relationship with our teacher. Amazing that someone sacrificed themself to teach our children. We are very lucky and thankful for our teacher. Little children’s heads are still hard to receive something but a good teacher can do it. (Mother HB)

Children supporting and cooperating with each other

One of the very positive features of the ECD settings was the ways in which children supported and helped each other. For example, we observed an older girl in an ECD centre taking a younger boy to his mother when the boy became upset, and parents, older siblings and young children singing along together and sharing toys in a homebased ECD service. Values of caring for each other were reinforced according to parents in one of our interviews. These parents also appreciated the policy that children were not allowed to be hit. Where settings had mixed age ranges, older children led action songs and younger children copied them. In two ECD centres, we were told that children with special needs were included as members of the class and given extra support when needed. Children arriving late were welcomed into activities.

Child concentration and engagement

Children in most settings concentrated for some of the time and were interested and engaged in the education activities. But concentration and interest diminished in ECD settings where children were expected to sit at a desk for lengthy periods of time. In three ECD centres, children were observed sitting for 1½ to 2 hours in rows with the whole class, following teacher-directed activities. Only a small amount of time—around 15–30 minutes—was allowed for play. In these settings we observed about a third of the children were very restless and looking around for much of the time. In some centres several boys were especially restless, and some refused to participate when asked to perform.

An exemplar: children supported as active learners

The situation was different in the fourth ECD centre, where children spent a short time in a whole group, with a teacher reading a story in a lively manner and asking questions of children during the reading. The children then worked in smaller groups at one of three tables where activities (e.g., colouring in, gluing sand and stickers onto star shapes, and a matching game) were rotated, followed by play outside on large climbing frames and swings. Six volunteer parents worked with the children speaking in the local dialect during the small group activities, enabling every child to have adult interest and support where it was needed.

hen children were able to take responsibility for their learning, as in the fourth ECD centre, they showed greater concentration and interest. These are considered important dispositions that can be developed in the early years and help children to become lifelong learners (Claxton & Carr, 2004).

One of our recommendations is for teachers/facilitators to find a balance between large group activities, small group activities and opportunities for children to follow their own interests. In homebased ECD, where there were no desks and more adults and younger children were present, there was usually greater freedom for children to move and explore, although much time spent in whole group activities was observed in these programmes too.
Education programme

The core activities being undertaken at both the ECD centres and the homebased ECD services were focused on print-based literacy, verbal language and mathematics. The ECD centres all had many signs, posters, number and alphabet charts with printed labels displayed on walls. These displays, and story reading, contribute to a “print rich” environment that helps to encourage print awareness.

The emphasis on print-based literacy was on alphabet recognition, answering closed questions from book reading, and labelling parts of an illustration or identifying letters. Songs and chanting were often used to reinforce language, such as labelling parts of a body and explaining what it is used for and pointing to one’s own body part. In several ECD centres, the lesson was repeated at the end and this was seen as a way to reinforce learning. These are called “display exchanges” where the child is required to label parts of an illustration, performance or text, and “performance exchanges” where the adult would read and the children repeat. These exchanges contribute to children’s expertise in family and community activities. However, another “collaborative” exchange is also valuable in encouraging literacy practices and a lifelong interest in reading and writing. In this style, the teacher focuses on story meanings and often starts with a question or comment, and follows children’s interests. McNaughton, Wolfgramm and Afeaki (1996) have shown how Tongan parents of pre-school children could be taught to use a “collaborative” style in story reading that they could add to their other styles and thereby further develop their children’s literacy practices.

There was an emphasis on counting and number recognition in mathematics teaching, which parents liked. Many parents identified that they continued to review numbers and do counting at home with their children. Similar to reading tasks, mathematical ideas were not always being used for meaningful purposes.

Singing and actions were performed with competence and enthusiasm in every setting in which we observed. These action songs all involved gross motor skills, such as the watermelon action song which appeared to be a particular favourite in a homebased ECD. It involved standing up, turning around, clapping, and “chopping” the watermelon. In some settings, small groups of children were invited to perform in front of the whole group. Singing is a regular part of the daily programme—as one homebased ECD facilitator said: “Every day we have singing. It wakes the children up.” We were told that culture dancing is also a feature of the programme as is the national anthem. It may be that the alphabet and counting can be incorporated into singing and games.

In ECE centres in New Zealand creativity in drama, artwork, carpentry, and musical activities as well as singing are encouraged. We did not see pretend play (drama), carpentry or musical instruments being played, except during a short playtime in an ECD centre where children played plastic mini guitars. The displayed artwork was all adult drawn and much use was made of colouring in adult-drawn templates. In a programme in Northern Italy’s Reggio Emilia region, early childhood educators talk about the value for learning of what they call the ‘100 Languages of Children’. Timor-Leste children are learning more than one spoken language. (A parent says: “We want our children to know how to speak Tetum and also Portuguese.”)
not just about being able to understand when they read or hear these languages; research has shown that it is also very valuable for their creativity. Learning to use drawing, painting, music and dance as other “languages” is very valuable too, for the same reason.

Learning resources

Equipment and resources were generally, and understandably, limited. In ECD centres, there were usually a small number of books that were read by the teacher, and other equipment such as a small number of stickle bricks, small blocks, matching games, paper and drawing materials, glue, scissors, puzzles, soft toys. The teachers made some games and books and ChildFund staff were observed delivering new picture books labelled in Tetum and Portuguese to an ECD centre. In another centre children were completing workbooks but there were not enough for every child. There was very little outdoor equipment in most ECD centres, e.g., one ECD centre had a playground with three pieces of play equipment, a drop to rubble from the deck, a broken water pipe (so no water) and no toilet. Equipment was not always maintained or used. In one ECD centre, we saw balls that were flat and in another we saw new balls that had never been used. In several centres, equipment was still in its cellophane wrapper or kept in the storeroom instead of being brought out for the children to use.

The best-resourced ECD centre made a range of resources available for children to use. It had reasonably challenging outdoor play equipment—climbing frames, seesaws, swings, a sand pit—and the teachers put out scissors, glue, matching cards, crayons, books and paper for small group work. Children worked in small groups, and activities were rotated so every child was able to work on a range of activities. In a corner was a range of other resources that were accessible to children.

The ECD centres had more equipment and resources than the homebased ECD services. In the homebased ECD services where community venues were used, the facilitators might bring an activity for individual children to do, e.g., colouring in, but were not able to leave equipment there or had only limited storage facilities.

In many countries early childhood programmes are using the natural environment for learning. Natural environments contain huge potential for learning including multiple possibilities and opportunities for exploration and play. In countries in Europe, the United Kingdom and in New Zealand, outdoor learning with materials found in nature, in the forest or bush or seaside, is increasingly being seen as a valuable alternative to costly, man-made (plastic) equipment.

Outdoor play at Tunubibi Secar Homebased ECD service in Maliana district and Santo Antoni ECD centre in Manututo.

Usage of mother tongue, Tetum and Portuguese and local stories

The pre-school policy framework (Republica Democrata de Timor-Leste, 2012) emphasises the need for children to “master the instruments that make [it] possible for them to express themselves: to speak their mother tongue clearly, to learn a second language … (p. 15). The mother tongue (local dialect), used by children and families, needs to have an established place in ECD alongside the official languages, Tetum and Portuguese.
Teachers and facilitators in all the homebased ECD services and one of the ECD centres that included six volunteer parents in the daily programme made frequent use of the mother tongue in combination with Tetum and sometimes Portuguese. Parents said that this was necessary for sustaining the mother tongue and for helping the child learn Tetum.

Dialect is important—a bridge to learn. (ECD centre mother)

Our relationship with the home language is important because we are in a rural area. Most of us speak Fakaluku—it is a bridge…. It is related to culture and very important. So the teacher talks the home language. (HB father)

Some children don’t speak Tetum yet. So [the mother tongue] is important here. (ECD mother)

In ECD centres Tetum was mainly spoken and a small amount of Portuguese. Most print-based material was in Tetum and Portuguese. Whereas in homebased ECD, as befitting its informal character, mother tongue and Tetum were most likely to be heard.

The most important thing is language. We want our children to know how to speak Tetum and also Portuguese. (HB father)

A desire of parents was that alongside language learning, children should have opportunity to learn the local stories and songs of their culture.

In relation to culture, the teacher is talking about modern history, like the crocodile story. They don’t teach about [this district—the teacher does not know. I would like my child to be taught. (HB mother)

[Interviewer: Do the parents know the stories?] The chief and older people know their story. We have to invite older people. (HB father)

These views about language and culture offer fruitful ideas for consideration.

Patterns of comparative strength

Table 1 shows comparative ratings of each individual ECD service on the five dimensions rated. The shaded area denotes that this service was comparatively strong on the dimension. The table is a visual representation of the strengths of all ECD services for the items “Adult responsiveness” and most centres for “Child cooperation and socialisation”. It displays the better ratings for resources for ECD centres in comparison with homebased ECD services.

Table 1: Patterns of comparative strength of ECD centres and homebased ECD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECD Centre</th>
<th>Education programme</th>
<th>Child concentration and engagement*</th>
<th>Adult responsiveness</th>
<th>Child cooperation and socialisation</th>
<th>Resources**</th>
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*The HB children who were involved in the activities were concentrating and engaged. Because of the freedom of the HB setting, children could wander off to their parents if they were not interested.

**Resources were limited in all ECD services but better in ECD centres (shaded pale grey). The ECD centre where resources were most accessible to children is shaded in darker grey as being of higher quality because children were accessing and using the resources.

ECD Centre B stands out for rating highly on more dimensions than others. The homebased ECD programmes all do well on child cooperation and socialisation and quite well on child concentration and engagement.
Promising practice models

We analysed ECD Centre B and the homebased ECD services to find out what distinguishing characteristics in terms of staffing, organisation, resources, teaching practice and parent involvement could help to explain their ratings. We use this analysis to highlight two promising practice models of ECD centre and homebased ECD service provision as exemplars of strength in ChildFund Timor-Leste’s ECD programming.

ChildFund Timor-Leste’s ECD model is particularly valuable because it recognises that a child’s learning and development is affected by the relationships between the major settings in which the child participates (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the child’s early years, these settings will include the home, the ECD centre and the school. When the adults in these settings form positive connections in the interests of the child, the child will benefit. This is because what happens in one setting can be reinforced in the other, and adults in each setting can learn from each other. The ChildFund model recognises the holistic way in which dimensions of human development are integrally woven together. The model emphasises access to health and nutrition, learning and development, and parent education and support.

The goals of integrating good quality learning and development for children; parent education, support and contribution; and close connections with schooling were reflected in the operation of ECD Centre B. The characteristics of the programme that made this integrated and holistic model work well in this centre were:

- teachers who had some teacher training and health training, were experienced and were involved in in-service training;
- reasonably good resources and outdoor equipment that were freely available to children;
- classrooms organised to cater for a maximum of 30 children (smaller class size than some other classrooms);
- a system of trained parent volunteers assisting in the programme;
- parents bringing and sharing nutritious food;
- use of mother tongue alongside Tetum and Portuguese;
- a location in the school grounds and a close relationship between the ECD centre and school.

The features found in this ECD centre—trained teachers, small group size, and high adult:child ratio (number of adults to children)—are associated in much international evidence with learning and development outcomes for children (Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008). Trained teachers can draw on their knowledge of teaching and learning to provide opportunities for interactions and activities that help children learn. The involvement of parent volunteers means the children were able to interact with more adults. This is especially important for language learning, and the use of mother tongue alongside Tetum acted as a bridge between the mother tongue and the official language. Parents were learning about child development through their involvement with the teachers and children.

Portrait of ECD Centre B

The highest-rated ECD Centre B was located in the grounds of the school and had three adjacent classrooms. Each classroom had tables and chairs supplied by ChildFund and a small range of equipment. Many number, colour and picture charts labelled in Tetum and Portuguese were displayed on walls. Children’s work was pegged on a line suspended across the room. This public display of work tells the child their work is valued and important.

ECD Centre B had better qualified teachers than the other ECD centres. The four teachers had all graduated from high school and undertaken an intensive two-week teacher training course. These teachers had each done a range of in-service courses and were keen to do more. They each had Portuguese language certification and had done UNICEF training for toys. Two teachers had been health promoters and one had been involved with the Red Cross. The four teachers had done workshops on teaching methodology and on local dialogue training. Other involvement in training included attendance at the first ECCD National Conference in Dili, 2012, and TOT Training for Methodology of Teaching.

The centre was organised so that each class had a maximum of around 30 children, so the class size was not as big as some others we saw. Only a short time was spent in whole class activities—a lovely
Welcome to the visitors and group singing, then the teacher reading a story to the whole class. This took at most 15 minutes. Children were then divided into smaller groups where they worked for 45 minutes, colouring in, gluing sand and shapes onto patterns, and playing with small blocks. These activities were rotated. Six volunteer parents worked alongside the teacher in the classroom. They had talked with the teacher about their role and had ideas on how to support children. They took an active role during small group activities, helping the children when they needed help and talking in their local dialect.

What was noticeable about the small groups was that children were engrossed in their work—a sign that they are learning. We attribute their motivation and interest to the fact that they were doing things themselves (hands-on active learning), that they were able to work and interact with other children, and the teacher and parents were there to support them.

After the small group work, children went outside to play in a playground that had interesting climbing equipment for this age group. Many boys and some girls were particularly enjoying doing energetic physical activity.

Teachers said the best things about the ECD centre was the parent contribution. They like the fact that they are working with the Ministry of Education and have a certificate for teachers, and that parents are happy to come. Parents are bringing and sharing food now. The parents thought the best thing was the teachers. They liked that some nutrition was provided.

The teachers’ main suggestions for improvement were to have power and electricity installed. They were looking forward to being trained in using local materials. Parents wanted a whiteboard, more tables and chairs and more toys. Both teachers and parents would like a uniform “to attract children”.

The main strengths of the homebased ECD services were found in the integration of parent support and education with opportunities for children to interact together and undertake educational activities. The characteristics of homebased ECD that enabled this integration to occur were:

- opportunities for children to socialise with other children;
- opportunities for parents to meet and talk together, and thereby strengthen social and community connections;
- the high level of parent involvement in the education programme; and
- the use and reinforcement of children’s mother tongue.

The model of provision could be enhanced through finding ways to boost the training levels of adults acting as facilitators in the communities where the services are located.
Portrait of homebased ECD Service E

The homebased ECD service operates in a small community building in a village with just a small number of houses. The building has wide openings below the roofline but no windows or electricity. It is made of concrete, has no floor coverings and was bare on our arrival. The facilitator and parents quickly sellotaped some pictures on the walls and brought out a few chairs in preparation. The homebased ECD service is open on three mornings per week and has only been operating for a month. Sometimes other groups are using the building and the session cannot be held.

The four facilitators were appointed by their community in a meeting where parents discussed what attributes they wanted and then voted. Patience was seen as a core attribute. The facilitator whom we interviewed had graduated from high school and had homebased training from CBO Icatutuno.

Seventy children are enrolled, and on the day we came 58 attended—24 girls and 34 boys. Most children were aged 4, 5 and 6 years old, but the age range is 2 to 6. The centre is inclusive, for the whole community, not just sponsored children, a question often asked by parents. The facilitator said that recruitment of families happened through meetings with villagers where the village chief was informed and asked to let families know.

Many parents had walked with their children to get there; some had arrived by motorbike. Younger and older siblings were also there. There was a community feeling as parents and children greeted each other and a sense of bubbly energy.

The facilitators helped the children line up and say prayers. Then children were formed into a circle, held hands and played energetic action games that were modelled by the facilitators: running to the centre to jump together and move back out, legs in and out of the circle, swaying hips, clapping and singing. These games are good ways to foster cooperation, coordination and develop physical competencies. It was noticeable that no child was forced to participate and a small child stood close to his mother in the middle of the circle. Having practised the actions, the movements were brought together in a sequence.

Then children were seated on the floor in smaller groups, each given a piece of paper and invited to colour in a picture drawn by the facilitator. The facilitator demonstrated colouring in and spoke in the local dialect and Tetum. Parents stood behind the children and the facilitator advised: “Stand back and let them draw. Don’t do it for them.” Because of the high level of parent involvement, parents can take home ideas used in the ECD service.

The facilitators do not use the pre-school curriculum but they focus every day on literacy, colouring, singing (“It wakes the children up”) and culture dancing. They have designed a weekly programme of topics (e.g., animals, trees and plantation) which link to the singing.

The best thing about this service, according to the facilitator interviewed, is that it is in a rural area far from villages where children would be excluded from ECD if they did not have this service. The best thing for parents were that the ECD was focusing on parents’ aims, which included

- to be educated, not to go back again the same as us (mother);
- to be educated and have a good way of learning (father);
- my child at least to write or know something (father);
- some children are still afraid of each other but they will get to know each other well (mother); and
- when they go to primary school it will be easy for them to adapt (father).

The main suggestions for improvement were to have their own space and training for the facilitators. They would also like a uniform and more toys.
CURRICULUM, PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT

All of the ECD centre teachers and one of the three homebased facilitators used the pre-school curriculum. One homebased facilitator who was very new in the role stated that she had designed a topic programme and then developed a timetable based on that. The other facilitator said that she based teaching and learning activities on what she learned from training/professional development from ChildFund and local partner staff.

In all of the ECD centres annual plans showing themes or topics for each month including the seasons and religious festivals, e.g., Easter and All Souls and All Saints days, were displayed. They appeared to be standardised plans associated with the teachers’ manual and teaching guidelines from the Ministry of Education.

Comments from participants beyond teachers suggested that teachers have insufficient in-depth understanding of teaching support materials such as the ‘Manual’ as it is written in Portuguese and this is not a language that many teachers are highly proficient in reading. Concerns were also raised about the government-provided teacher training taking place during term breaks.

A variety of formal and informal assessment practices and reporting to parents were described. Teachers in one ECD centre said that parents were informed about their child’s performance in a number of ways. First, through informal conversations that took place when parents approached teachers at the centre or anywhere they met. Secondly, more formal assessment of children’s learning was reported to parents via an annual report card. Teachers in this centre stressed the complementary role of parents and families in children’s education. In another ECD centre, teachers described tests where they check to see if children know symbols or not and tests for reading. Teachers stressed that if a child does not pass a test the child still carries on. The experienced homebased facilitator who used the pre-school curriculum reported that she referred to the children in her planning for the week, the month and the year. She described her assessment processes as “some keeping in mind and some writing down”. This facilitator, who had taken part in ongoing government training, referred to an evaluation checklist that she filled in for each child every day and noted that she reported daily and weekly on children’s progress. She said that children had a final exam they had to pass before they could go on to grade one and that they received an ECD diploma and ECD report when they left, which parents submitted to the primary school. This facilitator also noted that sometimes children have to repeat the year before grade one. She stressed

Parents also have responsibility to help children succeed and I talk to parents when there are concerns so they can help children at home.

We strongly recommend that children are not required to sit and pass a final examination. It encourages an inappropriately low expectation by teachers and adults and negatively influences relationships.

FREQUENCY AND INTENSITY OF ECD SERVICES PROVIDED

Children are starting ECD centres at age three years, and homebased ECD at all ages since infants and toddlers come with their parents. A number of international longitudinal studies that have followed children from pre-school to school (Barnett & Lamy, 2006; Broberg, Wessels, Lamb, & Hwang, 1997; Sylva et al., 2010; Wylie, Thompson, & Lythe, 2001) have shown that children who had two or three years’ pre-school before starting school did better on mathematics and literacy measures at school. The UNICEF Timor-Leste pilot project is also intending to evaluate the impact of pre-school education on children after two years. The starting age for ECD is an age that should benefit children, provided the provision is of good quality.

In general ECD centres are opening for 2½ hours per day for five days a week and homebased ECD services are opening for two hours per day for three days per week. There is a possibility that the hours could be extended in ECD centres if teaching methods were altered and water, toilets and snacks were available. In New Zealand there is a policy to encourage 3–4 years olds to attend ECE services for 20 hours per week. Statistics are not gathered on actual attendance (only enrolment) so we are not able to comment on the length of time individual children are attending. A recent review of international literature (Mitchell et al., 2008) that included analysis of hours per week of attendance showed that full-time attendance had no benefits over part-time attendance for children from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The hours being offered in the Timor-Leste centres fall within a range that can benefit children, if the ECD is of good quality, although some parents in homebased ECD would have liked more hours available. A key recommendation will be for ChildFund to focus on quality in ECD, because poor quality ECD can be harmful to children.
CORE AND TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES OF TUTORS/TEACHERS WHO WORK/VOLUNTEER IN THE ECD CENTRES

We interviewed 17 women who had paid or voluntary positions in four ECD centres and three homebased services. Their ECD experience ranged from one month to 12 years. None of these women had a formal ECE/ECD teaching qualification although a number had graduated from high school and/or had qualifications and experience in related fields, e.g., health promotion or working with Red Cross. Most of the teachers and some facilitators were engaged in formal and informal training and professional development on an ongoing basis. This training, professional development and capacity building ranged from one-day seminars (e.g., about EMIS) with the Ministry of Education to intensive literacy training provided by the government in districts, ongoing training for government-paid teachers during term breaks by INFORDEPE and training provided by ChildFund or local partners about child assessment or using resources.

Teachers variously described the content, relevance and usefulness of these courses. Many were mindful of their lack of training in particular areas or keen for ongoing training about teaching methodology and strategies. Several had obviously heard about the Child Friendly Schools project that UNICEF developed, which ChildFund is now promoting in primary schools.

Like to have teacher training in terms of handicapped and local things we can do, more creating local resources but need training. (ECD centre teacher)

I want to have more courses about Portuguese language and need more—health and nutrition and also child-friendly. (HB facilitator)

We want new and different ways of teaching so children aren’t bored. The pre-school has restrictions though. We have 1:34 teacher:child ratios. We want a course on teachers and creativity and on new teaching strategies and child-friendly. Also how to provide areas of play e.g., reading corner for benefit of children’s learning. (ECD centre teacher)

Training and ongoing professional development of pre-school educators is a strategic focus area identified in A policy framework for pre-school education (Republica Democratica de Timor-Leste, 2012). This document identifies that “teachers are poorly trained and classrooms lack sufficient teaching and learning materials available in the appropriate languages of instruction”. It raises the concept of ‘appropriate training and experience’ and introduces the notion that “accreditation for previous training and experience will be recognized” (p. 5).

It appears that the current in-service training and professional development available to teachers and facilitators is ad hoc rather than a series of integrated, relevant, related courses. A number of concerns were raised by teachers and other informants about the quality and relevance of the intensive training provided by INFORDEPE in term breaks. Teachers in ChildFund-supported ECD centres who are paid by the government are expected to engage in this training.

Teachers and facilitators are aware of the gaps in their competencies particularly in relation to child-centred teaching methods or learning through play: “Halimar, Aprende, Halimar”. Several informants identified that it was the teaching methodology and strategies that need to be reviewed in ECD provision rather than the curriculum itself, as proposed by the Ministry of Education.
PARTICIPATION OF PARENTS AND OTHER COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN PTAS, ECD COMMITTEES AND OTHER COMMUNITY SUPPORT NETWORKS

Parents play a strong role in supporting ECD services through involvement in formal structures and in volunteer work. Overall, parents who were interviewed conveyed a willingness to work in the interests of the children.

Family focus group interviews at Leuro Homebased ECD service in Lautem and Tunubibi Secar in Maliana district.

PARENT TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS (PTAS)

PTAs were seen as an important structure in ECD centres. Two of the four ECD centres had a PTA and the other two were planning to set one up. Homebased ECD services did not have PTAs. We undertook focus group interviews with PTA members in the two ECD centres to find out about their roles and the work undertaken. The roles included organising, acting as a link between teachers and parents and with the partner, and raising issues and making suggestions to teachers about resourcing and the education programme.

The PTA secretary at ECD Centre D identified her roles as organising school cleaning and a schedule for parents to have turns providing food for the twice-weekly school feeding programme. Every quarter she met with teachers and parents and they talked about the education programme, changes in the setting, etc. She saw her role as monitoring the performance of teachers and keeping parents involved and informed.

The PTA chair at ECD Centre A identified her role as being to look after the ECD centre, to pass on issues to the teachers and the local partner and to help get these issues addressed. She said that if she noticed things, for example a lack of resources, she would sit down and discuss this with the teachers. Specific duties included organising general cleaning of the ECD centre and helping with projects such as playground redevelopment. One of her suggestions for teachers was to grow fruit such as pawpaw (papaya) in the ECD centre grounds for children’s snacks.

INFORMAL VOLUNTEER WORK

Participation and involvement by family members in ECD centres included parents undertaking general ‘school’ cleaning, helping teachers in the absence of official teacher aides, and cooking food for children or providing food for the school feeding programme when it was their turn.

During focus groups parents were asked for suggestions about how ECD provision could be improved. Parents’ willingness to contribute their own labour and make resources to support improvements was evident in these discussions. In ECD Centre D several parents identified that electricity, water and a school kitchen were needed on-site. They suggested they could provide coconut leaf to roof a basic shelter and build it themselves if ChildFund provided other materials. They said that if materials were supplied, they could connect the ECD centre up to the public water supply 20 metres away.
In another homebased ECD service which was operating from a community hall, parents advocated strongly for “a proper house for pre-school, chairs and tables, and facilities”. They wanted a “proper toilet and water for [the children’s] health”. They talked in an open meeting with ChildFund staff, and discussed reciprocal arrangements whereby ChildFund would provide temporary facilities and parents would provide mats and other resources.

One homebased ECD took place on the sub-village chief’s front porch and was facilitated by his daughter. He had allegedly given his approval for land to be donated for an ECD centre. Discussion during the focus group meeting traversed the rationale for a centre, the willingness to donate land, and reciprocity between ChildFund and families. A mother identified, “Because children are little and we are far from town, we need a centre here—local”. A father agreed, suggesting how ECD provision could be improved in their sub-village:

Better we provide a centre, a semi-permanent structure here. A simple house, not the sub-village chief’s house as at present. For the land, we are ready to donate some [land for a centre] and for the church sisters and the Timor-Leste army.

Another father summed up: “We hope that God bless us, you [ChildFund] provide building materials and we’ll donate the land. There is water there as well.”

**CONNECTIONS WITH SCHOOLS**

We interviewed a local grade one teacher in Bobonaro and a primary school principal in Los Palos to find out about their perceptions of ECD provision. According to them, they had good relationships with the ECD teachers, shared information about families and children, and saw benefits of ECD attendance for children in supporting a smooth transition to school.

The principal was highly supportive of the role of ECD, arguing that children who have not experienced ECD find it difficult to adapt to school. He noted that good relationships existed between teachers in both settings and that children’s end-of-year assessments and final reports are passed on from ECD to school. He stressed the importance of ECD being provided free of charge for children and their families, the need for a greater emphasis on literacy in ECD programmes, and the desirability of more facilitators (teachers) and learning materials being provided by ChildFund where possible.

The grade one teacher also spoke highly of the relationship she and other teachers at the nearby school had with ECD centre teachers. She was a parent of children who attended the ECD centre so visited regularly to drop off and collect her children. She noted that she and the ECD teachers shared information about children and concerns. The teacher also mentioned the importance of ECD in supporting children to develop social skills and school readiness, e.g., getting up each day, wearing a uniform etc. She argued that ECD “teachers should have a good plan for teaching children so they are learning reading and writing” and that ChildFund/Hamutuk-supported ECD should have a school feeding programme more regularly than once a month.

**LOCAL PARTNERS AND NGOSS**

Cooperation between ChildFund and local partners, and ChildFund and other NGOs—for example, Plan International, World Vision and UNICEF (to a lesser degree because of their primary support focus on government)—was identified by informants and observed by researchers.

The key forum for formal cooperation is the Ministry of Education ECD Working Group, where representatives from a wide range of NGOs meet on an ongoing basis with Ministry of Education officials to discuss key policy issues related to pre-school education specifically and ECD more generally. Several interviewees noted how slow progress was in terms of ECD and that whilst each NGO was providing its own programmes, the Ministry of Education needed to provide strong leadership for the sector.

Several interviewees from NGOs supported the establishment of an NGO forum where strategies for combined advocacy could be discussed in order that greater influence could be exerted on policymakers and politicians in relation to ECD issues. Several different interview sources confirmed the view that ECD issues are currently afforded a lesser priority by the Ministry of Education than issues specifically related to pre-school or pre-primary education, as it is sometimes known. Urging the government to set up an ECD Council.
under the Prime Minister’s office was also discussed by several informants. They suggested that the ECD had a much broader focus than education and that many Ministries want to claim ECD because of the overlapping interests of Child Protection, Health, Education, Public Works etc. and the large amounts of funding available from organisations, including the World Bank and a range of other donors and aid organisations. There was a general consensus that coordination of ECD provision is essential to ensure that money is well spent and that the benefits are far reaching.

**DETERMINE THE EXTENT OF PARTNERSHIP WITH THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION BOTH AT THE DISTRICT AND NATIONAL LEVELS.**

The government’s *Policy Framework for Pre-school* 

*Education* (December, 2012) identifies a range of issues to be addressed. Work appears to be underway in the following areas:

- Rapid expansion of pre-schools;
- Mapping exercise to obtain a profile of services for children aged 3 to 5 and their location;
- Education Management Information System (EMIS) gathering statistical data;
- Mother tongue project to reinforce the role of the mother tongue as a transition from home to school.

Plans are underway to

- introduce minimum staffing and building standards and accredit pre-schools;
- review the pre-school curriculum; and
- introduce an accreditation system for teacher training.

This is a comprehensive work plan for a new administration and only recently established pre-schools to undertake. The Pre-school Education Directorate at the Ministry of Education was set up only two years ago and pre-schools were first established in 2003. Meanwhile Ministers and government officials are mindful of advocacy by NGOs to advance an ECD policy agenda to support their current work programmes. We heard from UNICEF that the Minister of Education had recently requested a comprehensive briefing on ECD. There is obviously much to be done in the area of ECD. The researchers sensed growing frustration in the sector about the time things are taking and the role of the Ministry of Education and government. One informant said: “Other groups [including ChildFund] have capacity and want to share but see that the Ministry of Education needs to take the lead.”

A number of issues were raised by district and national office Ministry of Education officials. One issue was sustainability. “We don’t want ECD to exist only when we have NGOs here. The government has to do something so that when NGOs leave so ECD can keep running.” This issue was also raised by several staff working for NGOs and relates to the question discussed in the next section of how to inscribe ChildFund’s current work into the National ECD framework currently being developed by government.

A district Ministry of Education official was very complimentary about the collaborative role ChildFund plays in education in the district. She considered ChildFund, including Hamutuk, a development partner with local government. She mentioned the provision of furniture for pre-schools as well as schools and that district education staff were informed about, and involved in, teacher recruitment by ChildFund for tutor teacher positions.

She identified a number of key challenges for ECD programmes as follows:

- pre-school buildings/classrooms (most of which are run by NGOs in this region) are not up to standard;
- the government’s feeding programme has not been extended to pre-schools;
- only limited resources/learning materials are available;
- most teachers are volunteers because they are not qualified;
- the government subsidy for pre-schools is very low at 50 cents per child per month; and
• the budget allocation for district education is very low.

She stressed that the Ministry of Education would support ChildFund to expand their pre-school provision in the district she had oversight for if they had the resources. She identified their role to include meeting with the community and local leaders and assisting in the setting up of pre-schools. She argued that ChildFund would have no problems with land and the existence of pre-schools because of the Ministry of Education support. She also suggested that

ChildFund needs to provide teacher training because what the government provides for government paid teachers and volunteer teachers in districts during term breaks/school holidays is not enough at only three times per year. ChildFund have a lot of pre-school teachers to provide for but it would be good if this training could be extended to other pre-school teachers not in ChildFund supported pre-schools.

Her focus, as previously identified and expected, was on the provision of pre-school education rather than ChildFund’s broader focus on ECD.

In another district, the Ministry of Education official interviewed said that based on monitoring reports, ChildFund ECD centres are playing a very good role in preparing children for school, especially in knowing their ABC. ChildFund provides five ECD centres in the district. He said homebased ECD services were by nature more informal and did less numeracy and literacy preparation. We asked for monitoring reports, but were told these are not publicly available.

This district Ministry of Education official considered the main challenge for ChildFund is to recruit teachers who have not just graduated from secondary school but hold a diploma. Some ECD teachers were still working on a volunteer basis. The Ministry of Education was not able to help with provision of a teacher.

UNICEF, whose key function is to support the government, is keenly interested in ECD in Timor-Leste. The UNICEF Chief Officer of Education commented that UNICEF valued the participatory process of the ECD Working Group and acknowledged ChildFund as an active partner. She went on to describe ChildFund Timor-Leste as a very active donor participant and suggested that there were many emerging issues that the organisations could collaborate on with government.

When asked about ChildFund’s contribution to ECD in Timor-Leste, she identified that ChildFund had a good model of ECD provision that they could share and stressed that UNICEF in partnership with the government wanted to learn from organisations such as ChildFund. She also remarked on the valuable partnership between UNICEF and ChildFund Timor-Leste in relation to Child Friendly Schools. She noted the importance of ChildFund continuing to pilot and document what it is doing in terms of ECD, including the University of Waikato review, and urged them to keep the momentum going.

HOW CURRENT CHILDFUND’S ECD WORK COULD BE INSCRIBED INTO THE NATIONAL ECD FRAMEWORK

In this section we use findings from our review to explore how current ChildFund ECD work could be inscribed into the national ECD framework being developed by the government. We note that ChildFund staff and participants are in a good position to understand the aspirations, needs and challenges for a national policy framework and how their work might fit within it. In New Zealand, when the government developed a 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education, it established a working group of sector representatives and consulted through a range of forums to develop proposals. The strategic plan policy and support for it were widespread because of this democratic participation in formulating it. We suggest that it is through advocacy that ChildFund’s ECD work will become inscribed into the national framework, and that advocacy is most powerful when it is undertaken collectively. We would encourage ChildFund to work with other providers offering ECD, local partners and NGOs to formulate specific actions that might be supported on a collective basis. Our review findings suggest the following are core areas for advocacy:

• encouraging the government to consult in a meaningful way with ChildFund and other NGOs throughout its policy development and implementation;
• advocacy for the government to gather and analyse annual statistical data on enrolments and staffing in ECD centres and homebased ECD services;
• improving the quality of government-provided teacher training;
• supporting the access of ECD teachers and homebased ECD facilitators to good quality teacher training and in-service training;
• ensuring curriculum revisions are supported by professional development and resources available to ECD teachers and facilitators;
• improving the funding of ECD services; and
• encouraging the government to extend its school feeding programme to ECD centres and homebased ECD services;

**ECD PROGRAMMES IN TIMOR-LESTE AND WORLDWIDE**

In this section, we discuss some useful models for ECD from which ChildFund might learn.

**MOBILE ECDS AND ITINERANT TEACHERS**

The concept of mobile ECDS, mobile libraries and ECD facilitators working with children outdoors was discussed by ChildFund and other NGO staff. For example, one NGO has an initiative where an ECD facilitator takes a small range of learning materials into the rice fields where significant numbers of preschool children accompany their parents to work. Another NGO has recently added a second mobile library van to its operation. Mobile kindergartens are used in New Zealand where qualified teachers travel in a van, equipped with teaching and learning materials, to a variety of rural areas for a morning session on a specific day each week. The sessions are held in a community hall, and the equipment, books and toys are brought out from the van. Mobile ECDs could enable access for children who might otherwise not have opportunity to attend an ECD programme and could be another way to reach deprived and vulnerable children.

**PARENT EDUCATION**

ChildFund provides good support for parent education through involving parents in the education programme and in formal structures. We also asked staff from other NGOs about their parent education programmes. One NGO used parent education modules that are currently being translated into Tetum; another showed a UNICEF movie on child development—a popular move as it was both informative and entertaining for villagers—and supported economic development, e.g. supporting each family to develop a kitchen garden in front of their house and providing cooking demonstrations to encourage families to provide children with balanced meals rather than a single ingredient diet (e.g. only rice for dinner).

**ECD/PRE-SCHOOL ADVISERS**

Since 1999, a Pre-school Adviser has worked with the Pre-School Association of Vanuatu (PSABV) to support the development of early childhood education programmes and facilities in rural communities and urban centres throughout Vanuatu. A case study entitled *Janis Blong Toktok Pri-Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu and the role of New Zealand Volunteers* written by Volunteer Service Abroad New Zealand documents their ongoing engagement with the Pre-School Association of Vanuatu. The case study is planned to provide donors, development workers and other interested parties with in-depth views of the workings of volunteer programmes. The case study can be accessed on http://www.vsa.org.nz/about-vsa/new-publicationholder/case-study-janis-blong-toktok/

The findings of a recent study to measure the impact of this work through a process of participatory appraisal and lessons learnt are identified. The report also identifies a recent shift towards an indigenous approach to education in Vanuatu. This report might provide useful directions for the ECD in Timor-Leste in the future.

**PASIFIKA PLAYGROUPS**

In New Zealand, Pasifika Early Childhood Groups are a well-established feature of the early childhood landscape and are a little similar to homebased ECD services. In a research project involving these groups
(Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, 2006) it was found that Pacific parents wanted their community language and culture used and maintained for themselves and for their children. They wanted early childhood education outcomes, especially learning and socialisation opportunities, and preparation for school. All mentioned the central role of spiritual values in their child’s learning. Some also wanted their child “to be good in English as well”. We have seen some similar aims from parents in Timor-Leste. The strengths of these groups were in maintaining and strengthening their Pacific language and culture and in providing an education programme for children. They were also making a contribution to parents developing skills and knowledge that were being used in other paid or voluntary work. The quality of the education programme was dependent on the supervisor, her qualifications, fluency in the language and her own standing in the Pacific community. The reference supplied for this research shows the link to the website where a profile of a Pasifika Early Childhood Group is given, and more detail about factors that support these services.

**CONCLUSION**

The recommendations emerging from this review have been set out at the start of this report. The energy and motivation of ChildFund staff, teachers, facilitators and parents is the greatest resource that will contribute to the enhancement of ChildFund ECD services. The strengths of ChildFund’s ECD programme lie in its holistic approach to children and families, and its community-based empowerment model. ChildFund can play a lead role as a contributing partner with the Timor-Leste government, other governments and donor organisations in designing and implementing ECD programmes. It has commitment, capacity and current reach in terms of ECD service delivery in Timor-Leste. Many challenges and issues are apparent, and progress will continue to be made by ChildFund working systematically through these, in collaboration with governments, local partners and other NGOs.

**REFERENCES**


