



**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND
EMERGENT LITERACY IN CENTRAL AMERICA
AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC:
A REGIONAL RESEARCH STUDY**



What is RedLEI? Founding members





Introduction

- Emergent literacy (birth to primary school entry) is one of the key areas of RedLEI's research agenda
- Childhood is the first window of opportunity to promote integral human development, including the precursor skills for learning to read and write.
- There are no known studies covering Central America which document what is happening in the pre-primary space compared to the evidence (and no focus on emergent literacy).
- This research was designed to be a documentary analysis, reviewing policy and official documents. The work was done during the COVID-19 Pandemic which limited the team's capacity to access some documents and to conduct field research.

Conceptual framework

1. Early childhood education is linked to a variety of aspects from family to country level
2. The team conducted a literature review of early childhood best practices in the eight identified dimensions.
3. It was important to know the impact and influence of the connected dimensions.
4. This helped to answer the research questions by guiding through the categories



Dimensions

**TEACHING AND
LEARNING
(CURRICULUM)**



**STAFF CAPACITY,
LEADERSHIP
AND
MANAGEMENT**



**SOCIO-
EMOTIONAL
RELATIONSHIPS**



**CLASSROOM
DESIGN,
ENVIRONMENT
AND SAFETY**



**FAMILIES AND
COMMUNITIES**



**HEALTH AND
NUTRITION**



SUPERVISION, MONITORING AND SUPPORT

POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Dimensions and categories



Political and financial environment

- Educational levels
- Entry requirements
- Length of day at program
- Mandatory education regulations
- Financial policy
- Institution responsible for designing and implementing the policy
- Language of instruction
- Educational inclusion



Supervision, monitoring and support

- Monitoring, evaluation and support indicators
- License requirements
- Quality accreditation
- Community level standards
- Unique child identification system
- Systems for complaints and claims



Teaching and learning (curriculum)

- Curriculum areas
- Emergent Literacy skills
- Transition to first grade in primary school.
- Evaluation

Dimensions and categories



Staff capacity, leadership and management

- Training requirements
- Initial teacher training curriculum
- Requirements for entry into the workforce
- Continuous education
- Salary and benefits



Socio-emotional relationships

- Socio-emotional abilities in the education curriculum
- Socio-emotional abilities in the teacher training curriculum
- Socio emotional educational material



Classroom design, environment and safety

- Classroom safety and infrastructure standards
- Sanitary and hygienic environment
- Classroom design and environment
- Staffing standards

Dimensions and categories



Families and communities

- Educational programs at the community level
- Family involvement
- Financial contributions from families
- Family training



Health and Nutrition

- Early childhood health programs
- Health and nutrition support
- Food programs aligned with education programs
- Vaccination and education

Research questions and methodology

1.

Q1. What does the evidence say about best practices in early childhood education?

1. Literature review of evidence at the international, latin american, regional and local level

2.

Q2. What are the characteristics of early childhood education policy in the region?

1. Review of Public Policy Documents
2. Interviewing experts from:
 - Early childhood ministries
 - Universities
 - Multilateral and non-governmental organizations

3.

Q3. What characterizes the implementation of early childhood education in the region?

1. Review of research, public policy documents and national reports.
2. Interviewing experts from:
 - Early childhood ministries
 - Universities
 - Multilateral and non-governmental organizations

4.

Q4. What is the alignment between what the evidence says about quality early childhood education and the region's education policy and its implementation?

1. Analyze and triangulate evidence and data collected from document review and interviews.

Expert interviews

Experts interviewed	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Nicaragua	Costa Rica	República Dominicana
Experts in government and public institutions	7	6	9	Focus group	11	9
Experts in academia and universities	6	3	3	2	8	2
Experts in multilateral organizations	4	3	2	1	2	3
Experts at NGOs and foundations	5	1	3	2	5	3
Independent experts	0	0	0	0	0	3
TOTAL	22	13	17	6	26	20

Results

What is the alignment between what the evidence says about quality early childhood education and the region's education policy and its implementation?





Results

Political and financial environment

High alignment

- Great progress during the last two decades in terms of early childhood education policy and investment in the region.
- Numerous subsidies and programs were created to support children from vulnerable families.
- Requirements are geared towards greater inclusion:
 - Key for migrant children or those without a birth certificate.
 - More programs include education in children's mother tongue, which is important for indigenous populations.
- All countries provide the option of flexible schedules that take family needs into consideration.
- Program financing is the State's responsibility, which is often supported from various sources.



Results

Political and financial environment

Low alignment

- There is no regional early childhood education policy
- Government programs prioritize education levels that are compulsory
- In most countries, investment is insufficient to cover demand.
- Low coverage is a challenge, particularly in non-compulsory levels, and countries like Guatemala. In contrast, Costa Rica has the highest coverage in the region.
- Pre-school education is not a requirement for attending primary school
- A major challenge in the region is the articulation between the various institutions responsible for the different areas in early childhood education. Both DR and Costa Rica have initiatives to improve inter-institutional communications.



Results

Supervision, monitoring and support

High alignment

- Interinstitutional coordination includes supervision, monitoring and support systems internally in the public sector, which help guarantee adequate program implementation and evaluate decision making for better proposals.
- The different governments will have a unique registration system for schools, and some apply this same number for other programs in early childhood.
- Quality standards have been defined in terms of infrastructure and security, as well as public administration, at least at the policy level.
- All countries have a system for complaints, grievances and claims, also protocols in case of a violation of children's rights.



Results

Supervision, monitoring and support

Low alignment

- More work is necessary in systematizing supervision systems, as well as defining quality standards at the pedagogical level and for creating a characteristics and goals for children at the end of programs.
- Community level and private programs lack licenses for operating, which means their pedagogical approaches are not monitored by the government.
- The consequences for failing to reach quality standards, established in the policy and identified via supervision are unknown.
- Becoming a certified and accredited institution is optional and is mostly done at the private level by their own administrative teams.
- Some countries lack a unique child identifying number that allows to track children across social programs, particularly a system for migrant children.



Results

Teaching and learning (curriculum)

High alignment

- All countries have pedagogical documents or official curriculums for teaching children 0 to 6 years of age.
- The curriculums in the regions are flexible, considering various ways of learning and include elements for inclusion of all children, even those with special educational needs.
- The curriculums describe children as autonomous, actives and propose activities through the integral development of its areas.
- Play is proposed as a didactic tool to guide evaluations and learning activities.
- In most countries, there are documents that guide the process between pre-primary and primary levels of education.
- The evaluation types, techniques and instruments all take into considerations the specific characteristics of early childhood education.



Results

Teaching and learning (curriculum)

Low alignment

- At the regional level it is necessary to create specific curricula for the different levels and age groups.
- Emergent literacy proposals in the curriculum are present but fragmented and unequal. In the implementation there is a prioritizing of decoding without considering the other key abilities.
- There are challenges in ensuring that play is a primary didactic strategy for the age group.
- Implementing the proposed strategies for the transition into primary school remains a challenge, especially in integrating families and creating a continuum in the pedagogical methodology between schools.
- Most countries lack data and reports on how the curriculum is implemented in the classroom.



Results

Staff capacity, leadership and management

High alignment

- All countries require teachers for these age groups to have specific training, at some level.
- Successful practices in teacher training:
 - Costa Rica: requires all personnel to have a university level degree (+/- 4 years of study) in early childhood education and development. Teachers have a competitive salary and benefits. Teachers and principals are evaluated and provided further training as necessary.
 - Honduras: the national pedagogical schools provides the degree for the majority of teachers in the country, they are required to have a bachelor's degree in pre-primary education.
 - Dominican Republic also requires a bachelors degree for teachers who work in public early childhood education programs.



Results

Staff capacity, leadership and management

Low alignment

- Challenges remain in attracting, hiring and keeping qualified teachers.
- Initial and continuous training of educational personnel responsible for early childhood education, who have the right resources and tools to implement policy as it is written, remains a challenge.
 - Nicaragua and Guatemala only require a high school level degrees for pre-primary teachers.
 - Honduras still has teachers with high school degrees who are currently working in public institutions
 - Private institutions in DR have a percentage of teachers who are required to have studied Education.
- Hiring practices are not stringent, in most countries, salaries are low, making the profession unattractive and perpetuating low standards.
- Early Childhood Initial Teacher Training programs, particularly the curriculum need updating, and some programs require more years of education to ensure quality.
- The pedagogical support given to the staff needs to improve.



Results

Socio-emotional relationships

High alignment

- Socio emotional elements are explicitly presented in all early childhood educational curriculums in the region, with clear instructions for their implementation.
- In some countries there are rules to ensure peaceful, safe coexistence in the classroom to avoid any form of violence or undue punishment.
- There are additional materials such as guides on hospital pedagogy that work on bonding while the children remain in the hospital (Costa Rica and Nicaragua).
- In some countries, the personnel is trained to develop socio emotional capacities in their pedagogical practice so that they can pass these skills unto the children, including socialization and emotional development in teaching practice. This is included in pedagogical guides in the Dominican Republic.
- In the policy, there is an emphasis in creating relationship with the family, adults, and the community.



Results

Socio-emotional relationships

Low alignment

- More is needed in terms of encouraging positive interactions through play, dialogue, nurturing and positive parenting.
- There needs to be more research on the challenges and barriers that impact the implementation of the policy in terms of socio-affective relationships in the classroom.
- In some countries, in the teacher training curricula, socio emotional relationships are insufficiently mentioned, and there is a lack of data on its implementation.
- Some countries, like El Salvador, where social violence (gang violence) is prevalent, creating safe environments where both students and staff are suffering from their context, implementing these practices becomes particularly challenging.



Results

Classroom design, environment and safety

High alignment

- For the majority of programs and centers the policy is clear and detailed.
- In all countries, policy state that classrooms must be safe, accessible, and adequate for physical activities and stimulating educational processes.
- There are standards for restrooms and other sanitation infrastructure and protocols for supervision.
- There are guides with protocols, plans and simulations in case of emergencies as well as trainings and drills.



Results

Classroom design, environment and safety

Low alignment

- In some countries, the following guidelines need improving:
 - Access and protection for children with disabilities
 - Ensuring safe, hygienic and effective feeding programs
- Investment in adequate infrastructure and provision of necessary services, in particular aspects like potable water, electricity and accessibility.
- Establish public-private partnerships to ensure that early childhood education centers have the necessary resources for their proper functioning.
- Providing of sufficient resources and educational materials to ensure equitable access.
- Implementation of regulations, there are significant opportunities for improvement, particularly in schools in vulnerable areas and for indigenous or Afro-descendant populations, which increases the educational inequality gap.
- There is a lack of data indicating the periodicity of monitoring of these standards.



Results

Families and communities

High alignment

- Policy includes the participation of families and communities. It indicates the integration of the family in educational programs.
- Support given by the State to Community Education in order to strengthen and integrate families in Early Childhood Care and Education.
- Communication and training for families, caregivers and other providers is written in the law, and their participation is encouraged in the activities of the centers such as committees and the implementation of training workshops and home visits.



Results

Families and communities

Low alignment

- Programs for children from 0 to 3 years of age are shared among different ministries or institutions; in none of the countries was there an institution integrally responsible for early childhood education with the capacity to coordinate all activities.
- In Costa Rica there are programs and services for vulnerable families, but if families exceed the cut-off point, they lose these services. In other countries, assistance to vulnerable families is provided through cash, food or in-kind donations by the state.
- Improve training for home and the community-based programs, from an indigenous world view.
- Strengthen the participation of families in early childhood programs, especially in the 0 to 3 years cycle.
- Incorporate families in the improvement of education curricula.
- Supporting families, especially of the most vulnerable children. Changing attitudes about early education for families who do not have the socioeconomic conditions to dedicate time to their children's education.



Results

Health and Nutrition

High alignment

- In most countries, nutrition is addressed through the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama, an institution within the Central American Integration System (which includes the Dominican Republic) that achieved one of the few regional policies that promote a Food and Nutritional Security Law in each member country.
- Each country formulates its own policies of great diversity and scope, in most cases by Health authorities, who are responsible for nutrition programs.
- In Costa Rica and Honduras, vaccination has a high acceptance and compliance rate, and almost universal coverage in early childhood.
- Some countries apply successful practices such as the use of conditional transfers to increase children's compliance and participation in health and educational programs.
- Many curricula in the region include content on the consumption of healthy foods and the importance exercise.



Results

Health and Nutrition

Low alignment

- Expanding health programs and services, ensuring community participation is necessary.
- In Costa Rica, nutrition presents great challenges, since attention has shifted from malnutrition due to lack of access to food to preventing obesity or malnutrition due to unhealthy eating habits.
- In some countries, the coverage of feeding programs is insufficient to meet the demand of vulnerable children.
- In Guatemala, the nutrition policy is clear, but from the National Health Survey (ENSMI) from 2014, 46% of children have chronic malnutrition.



Recomendations



Recommendations

Regional level

- ★ Create opportunities for exchanges between nations, to allow learning and adapting public policy and its implementation at the national level, with an emphasis on creating regional goals and policies.
- ★ Improving and ensuring the implementation of existing public policy.
- ★ At the regional and country level, a single institution that is responsible and accountable for the results in early childhood education.
- ★ Stronger supervision, monitoring and support systems are key across the board. Knowledge about the implementation of programs, both by state and independent entities is necessary. A good example is Costa Rica's State of the Nation (Estado de la Nación) report.
- ★ Greater investment in the 8 different dimensions of Early Childhood Education that are highlighted in this research.

Recommendations

National levels

- ★ Create curricula that are appropriate for every age group and level in early childhood education, for family, community, and educational programs level which include:
 - ★ Promote childhood autonomy, while encouraging positive interactions with peers in their environment
 - ★ Incorporate pedagogy through play
 - ★ Focus on socio emotional aspects
 - ★ Focus on making all the skills related to emergent literacy part of the environment, play and pedagogy according to the child's ages and development.



Recommendations

- ★ Further strengthening all staff in Early Childhood Education, both pedagogical and non-educational, not only in terms of education requirements and training, but salaries and benefits. The field should be attractive for those who are interested, and programs at the community level in particular require further support.
- ★ This includes the materials and training in educating in emergent literacy
- ★ Socio emotional training and implementation is key. What is happening in the classroom is relatively unknown. This is an important aspect to supervise and follow-up on.



Recommendations

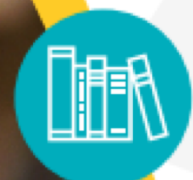
- ★ Community and family level programs are key to reaching distant rural communities, and many families are more comfortable with these programs. They are very effective, but those responsible need more training and follow-up. A good starting point is the Honduran community level program.
- ★ Health and Nutrition are important components, and often times strongly linked to education, but only if there is good inter-institutional collaboration. This should be encouraged, to help connect with families and provide certain services simultaneously.



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