Early childhood education in Liberia: a growing crisis

Investing in early learning can advance Liberia's Pro-Poor Agenda.

Participation in early childhood education (ECE) improves cognitive development and increases school readiness. Low levels of school readiness lead to costly inefficiencies in the education system, as disadvantaged and under-prepared children are more likely to repeat grades and drop out of school before completing the primary cycle.

Liberia has expanded access to ECE but quality has not kept up.

Increased demand for early childhood education (ECE) in Liberia has resulted in the number of students enrolled in ECE rising from a GER of 38% to 116% between 1981 and 2015, respectively. However, the quality of ECE instruction - which is essential for improving the developmental outcomes of young children - is low.

Summary of findings:

Teaching is mainly done through rote and drilling, despite child-centred pedagogies being core to the curriculum.

*The vast majority of teachers do not have formal qualification*s, and a minority of recently engaged with training.

*The national ECE curriculum is of a high-qualit*y, but it is not being used in most classrooms.

Most parents prioritise the quality when choosing a school, but only a minority visit the school to assess this.

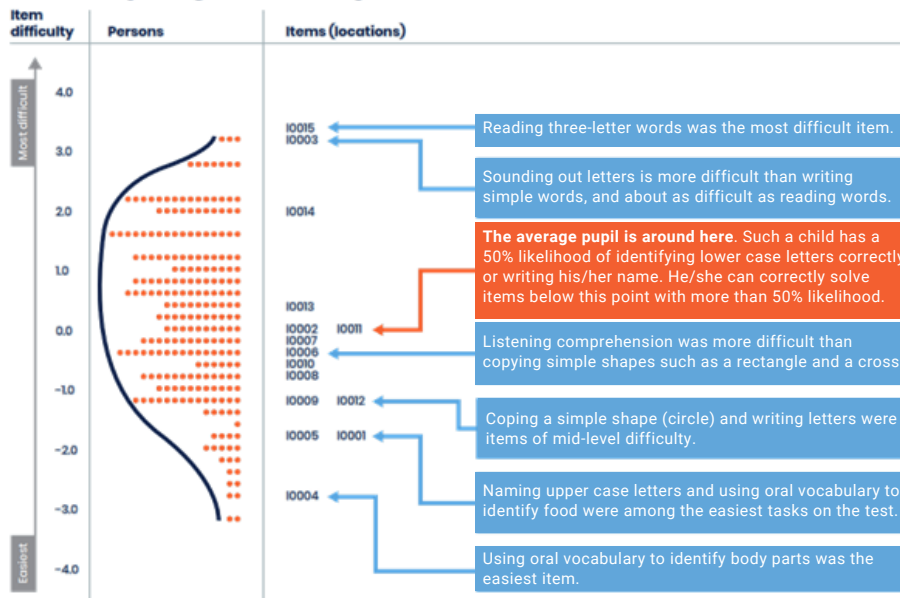*Children are on average only able to do comparatively easy assessment tasks,* even though most are over-age.

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Learning Outcomes

Although most (72%) of children enrolled in ECE were over the age of 6, most could only do the easiest assessment tasks. They struggled most with working memory, followed by numeracy, and then English literacy.
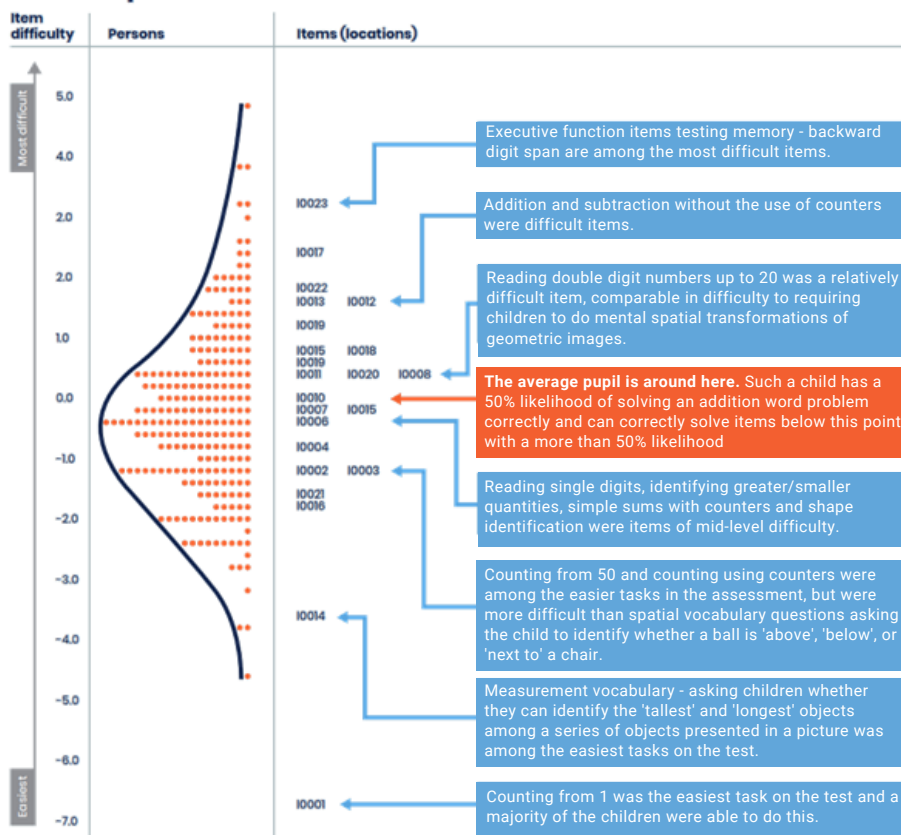
Item map, English literacy test

Item difficulty	Persons	Items (locations)

Most difficult

4.0

3.0 — I0015, I0003 — Reading three-letter words was the most difficult item.

2.0 — I0014 — Sounding out letters is more difficult than writing simple words, and about as difficult as reading words.

1.0 — **The average pupil is around here**. Such a child has a 50% likelihood of identifying lower case letters correctly or writing his/her name. He/she can correctly solve items below this point with more than 50% likelihood.

0.0 — I0013 / I0002, I0011 / I0007 / I0006 / I0010 / I0008 — Listening comprehension was more difficult than copying simple shapes such as a rectangle and a cross.

-1.0 — I0009, I0012 — Coping a simple shape (circle) and writing letters were items of mid-level difficulty.

-2.0 — I0005, I0001

-3.0 — I0004 — Naming upper case letters and using oral vocabulary to identify food were among the easiest tasks on the test.

-4.0 — Using oral vocabulary to identify body parts was the easiest item.

Easiest

On average, children in ECE classes in Liberia are able to use oral vocabulary, identify upper-case letters, copy simple shapes, identify lower-case letters, and write their name.

However, they are largely unable to read or write simple words, or to sound out letters.
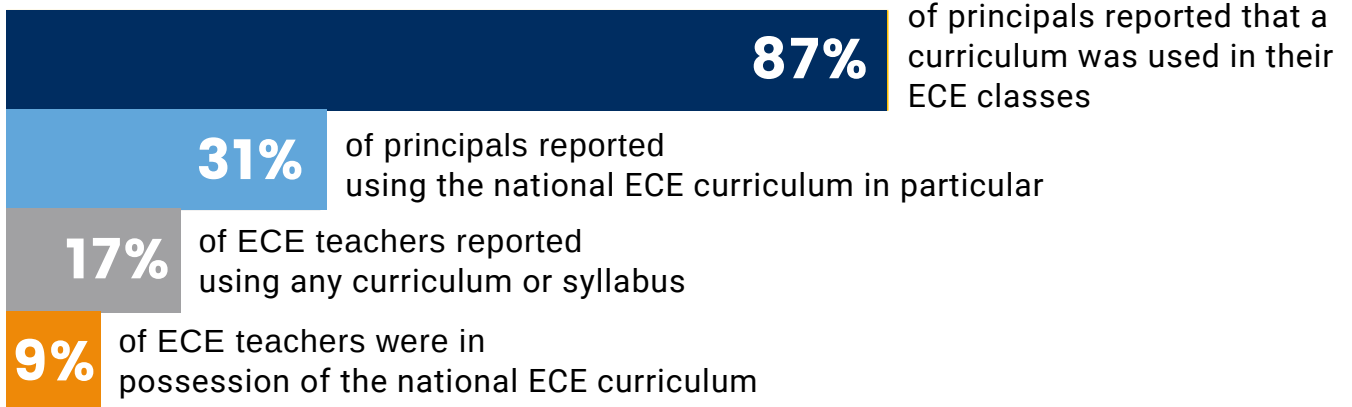
Item map: mathematics test

Item difficulty	Persons	Items (locations)

Most difficult

5.0

4.0 — Executive function items testing memory - backward digit span are among the most difficult items.

3.0 — I0023 — Addition and subtraction without the use of counters were difficult items.

I0017

2.0 — I0022, I0012 / I0013 — Reading double digit numbers up to 20 was a relatively difficult item, comparable in difficulty to requiring children to do mental spatial transformations of geometric images.

I0019

1.0 — I0015, I0018 / I0019 / I0011, I0020, I0008

0.0 — I0010 / I0007, I0015 / I0006 — **The average pupil is around here.** Such a child has a 50% likelihood of solving an addition word problem correctly and can correctly solve items below this point with a more than 50% likelihood

-1.0 — I0004

-2.0 — I0002, I0003 / I0021 / I0016 — Reading single digits, identifying greater/smaller quantities, simple sums with counters and shape identification were items of mid-level difficulty.

-3.0 — Counting from 50 and counting using counters were among the easier tasks in the assessment, but were more difficult than spatial vocabulary questions asking the child to identify whether a ball is 'above', 'below', or 'next to' a chair.

-4.0 — I0014 — Measurement vocabulary - asking children whether they can identify the 'tallest' and 'longest' objects among a series of objects presented in a picture was among the easiest tasks on the test.

-5.0

-6.0

-7.0 — I0001 — Counting from 1 was the easiest task on the test and a majority of the children were able to do this.

Easiest

On average children in ECE classes in Liberia are able to count upwards from one, apply measurement and spatial vocabulary, count with the help of counters, read single digits, identify shapes, and solve simple addition sums.

Higher order skills such as subtraction, reading double-digit numbers, harder addition sums, and spatial transformations were far less prevalent.
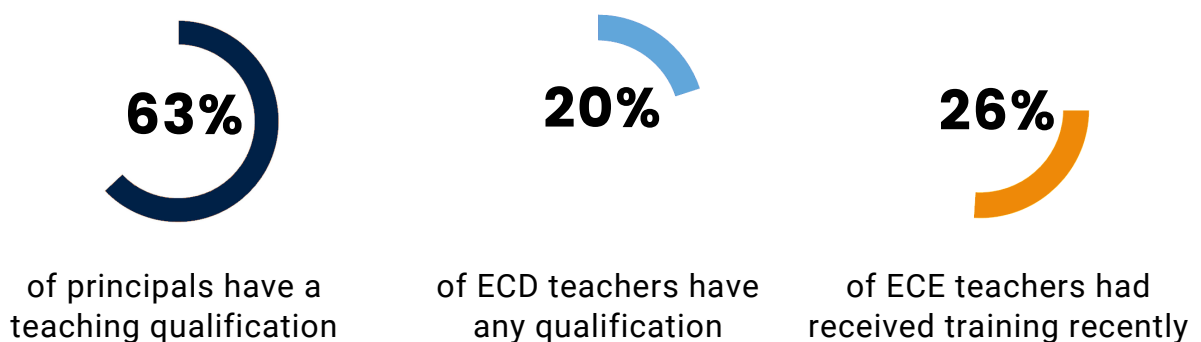
Curriculum

87% of principals reported that a curriculum was used in their ECE classes

31% of principals reported using the national ECE curriculum in particular

17% of ECE teachers reported using any curriculum or syllabus

9% of ECE teachers were in possession of the national ECE curriculum

Teaching

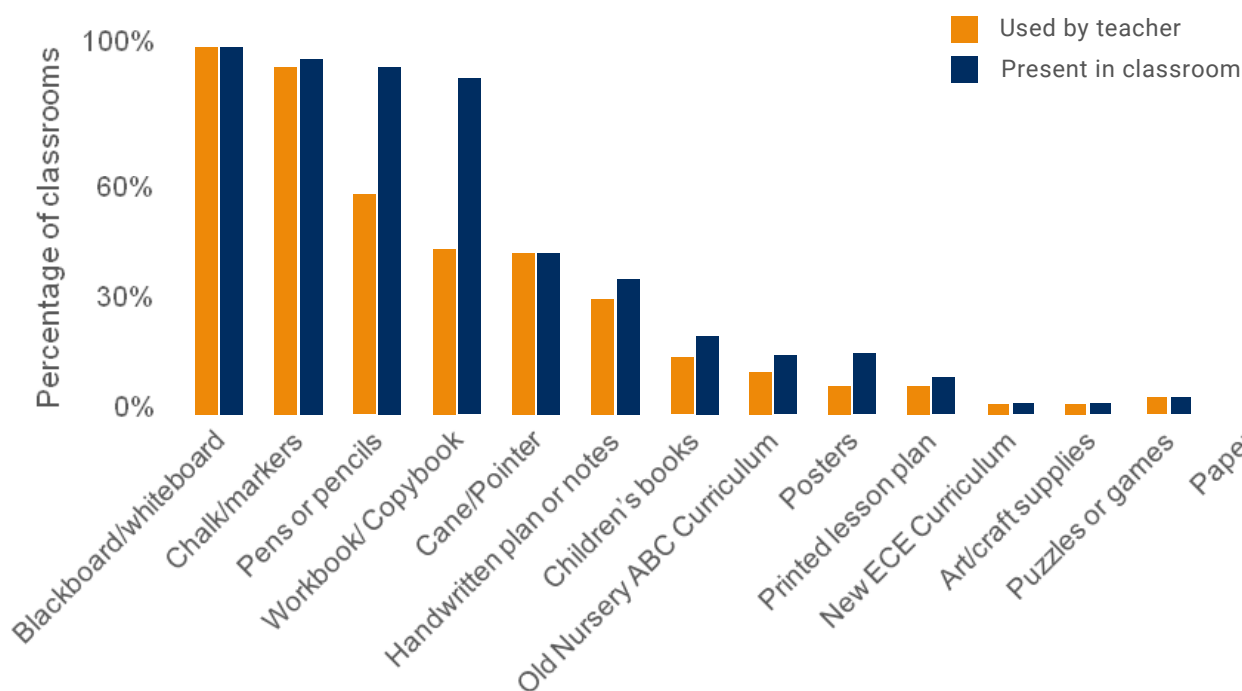In observed classrooms, the amount of time spent on different activities was as follows:

14%	27%	16%	13%
child-centred teaching	rote-teaching activities	classroom management	off-task
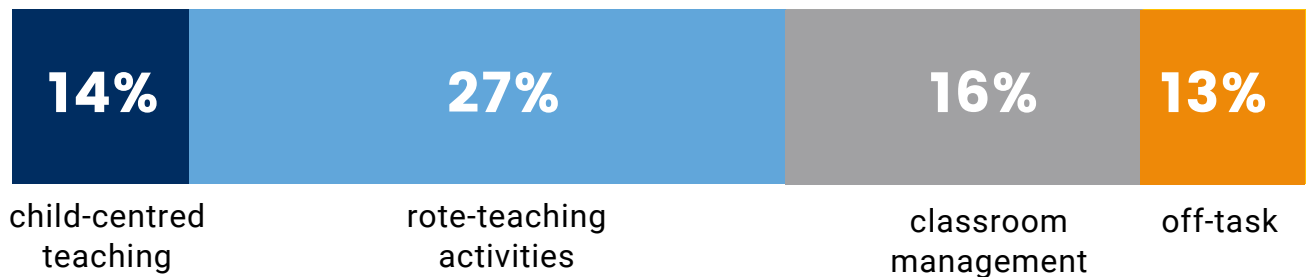
- Rote-teaching accounted for the majority (65%) of teaching time.
- No storybook reading or free play time was observed.
- All activities took place indoors.

- Class sizes ranged from 8 – 90, with 27 children on average.
- Almost all (97%) classes had some learning materials, although these were most often blackboards and workbooks .

Teacher Training

63% of principals have a teaching qualification

20% of ECD teachers have any qualification

26% of ECE teachers had received training recently

Materials

Most classrooms were stocked with a blackboard, chalk/markers, stationary, and workbooks. However, only blackboards and chalk were used ubiquitously by teachers. Children's books, posters, art/craft supplies, and puzzles or games were only present in a minority of classrooms.

Legend:
- Used by teacher (orange)
- Present in classroom (dark blue)

Y-axis: Percentage of classrooms (0%, 30%, 60%, 100%)

X-axis categories: Blackboard/whiteboard, Chalk/markers, Pens or pencils, Workbook/Copybook, Cane/Pointer, Handwritten plan or notes, Children's books, Old Nursery ABC Curriculum, Posters, Printed lesson plan, New ECE Curriculum, Art/craft supplies, Puzzles or games, Paper

Parents

50% of parents reported that quality was a key consideration when choosing a school. However, only -

43%

of parents visited the school before enrolling their child

Of these,

77% enquired about fees.

39% enquired about school facilities.

23% enquired about learning outcomes.

Nonetheless -

65%

of parents were happy with the quality of education

44% of parents reported meeting with the school to discuss their children

41% reported attending parent-teacher association meetings.

School management

Principals reported teacher absteeism to be among their most pressing challenges.

Reason for teachers' abseentism, reported by principal

- **34%** Own/family illess
- **22%** Laziness
- **19%** Training
- **10%** Lack of transport
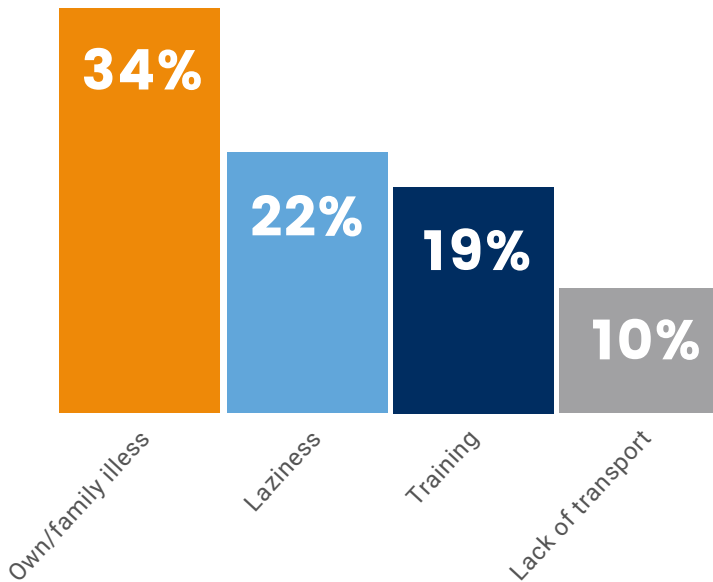
49% of principals who reported that teacher abseentism was a problem in their schools

Although schools frequently held staff meetings in which teacher absenteeism (among other teacher-related issues, such as professional development) was discussed, principals rarely took serious disciplinary action against absent teachers.

Percentage of schools that hold staff meetings to discuss teacher-related issues

- **75%** Reported by principals
- **61%** Reported by teachers

74% of cases of teacher absenteeism in which the only action taken by the principal was to discuss it with the teacher in question

Diagnostic & policy options

Targets

Benchmark
Good ECE learning and classroom quality goals set by curriculum, implemented in schools and used by parents to choose schools.

Status in Liberia
Curriculum is of high quality, but only 9% of the teachers had a copy of it, and 17% used it as teaching material.

Policy Options
- Provide principals with support to use the national curriculum, either through training and/or oversight from county and district education officials.

Resources

Benchmark
Teachers are trained in ECE, and ECE is appropriately funded by the government or otherwise parents can afford to pay the ECE fees.

Status in Liberia
80% of pre-primary teachers have no certificates. Resources at the central & school level are insufficient for delivering quality ECE. Parents cannot afford the cost, and only 18% pay their fees on time.

Policy Options
- Invest in ECE teacher training which prioritizes numeracy, letter sounds, and which integrates play and the development of socio-emotional skills into teaching methods.
- Provide classrooms with the resources needed to implement the curriculum.
- Consider mechanisms which make fees more affordable for parents (such as vouchers and cash transfers).

Information

Benchmark
Data about quality is gathered by head teachers, district education officers, and county education officers and used by parents to inform their choice of school.

Status in Liberia
Mechanisms for collecting information about school performance are in place but do not focus on existing ECE quality standards.

Policy Options
- Define ECE quality standards in the quality assurance system.
- Provide information that is accessible for all stakeholders including parents who may be illiterate.

Rewards & Sanctions

Benchmark
Teacher absenteeism or poor performance is monitored/sanctioned and good performance is rewarded by principals and parents.

Status in Liberia
49% of principals reported that teacher absenteeism was a problem. In 74% of cases, the only action taken was to discuss with teachers about attendance.

Policy Options
- Invest in principal training which includes school management and accountability, including setting appropriate targets, allocating financial resources efficiently, and rewarding or sanctioning performance.