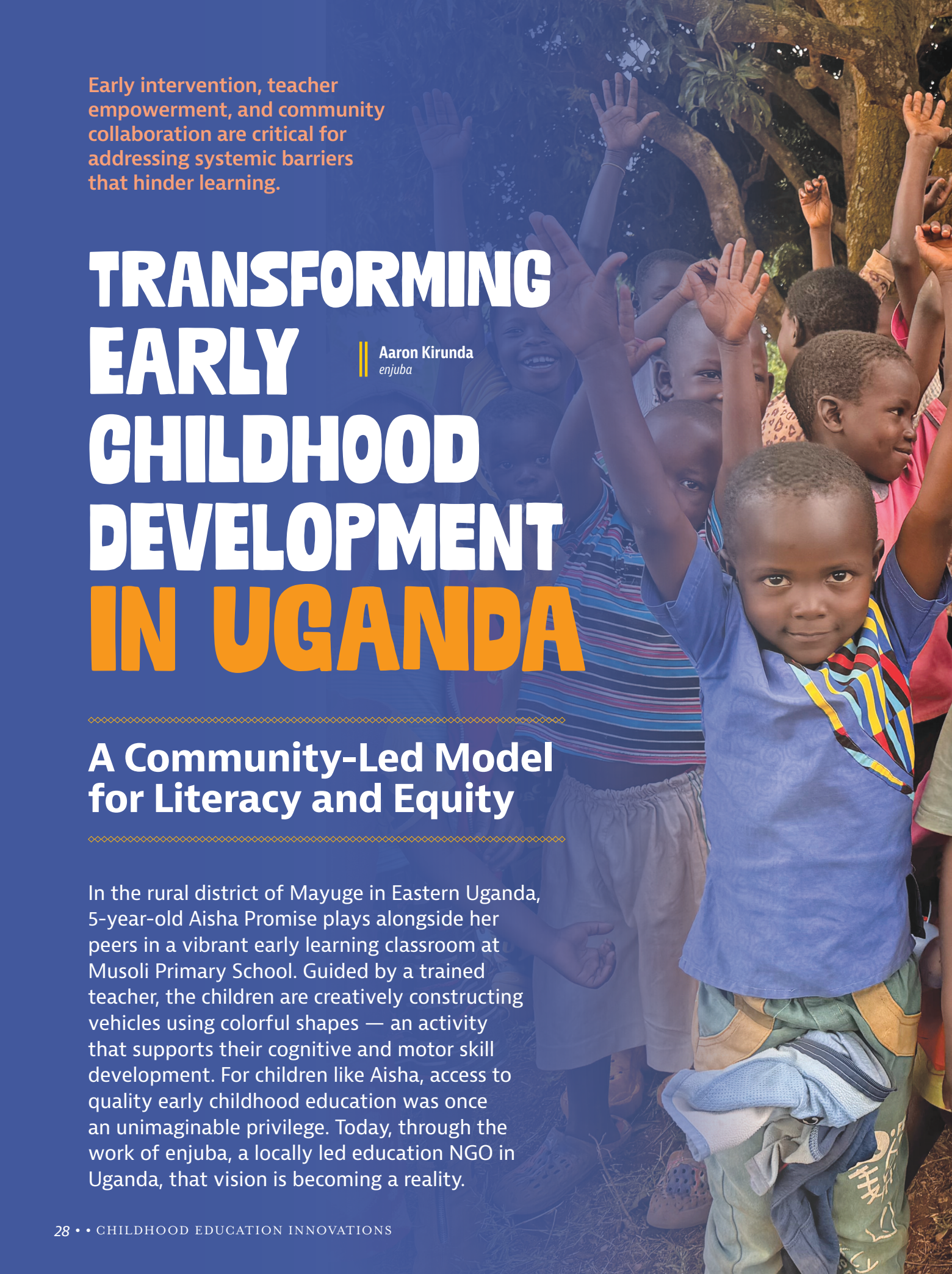




Early intervention, teacher empowerment, and community collaboration are critical for addressing systemic barriers that hinder learning.

TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN UGANDA

|| Aaron Kirunda
enjuba

A Community-Led Model for Literacy and Equity

In the rural district of Mayuge in Eastern Uganda, 5-year-old Aisha Promise plays alongside her peers in a vibrant early learning classroom at Musoli Primary School. Guided by a trained teacher, the children are creatively constructing vehicles using colorful shapes — an activity that supports their cognitive and motor skill development. For children like Aisha, access to quality early childhood education was once an unimaginable privilege. Today, through the work of enjuba, a locally led education NGO in Uganda, that vision is becoming a reality.



The transformative power of education is widely acknowledged in Uganda, yet its full promise remains unrealized for many children. According to the World Bank, eight out of 10 Ugandan children cannot read or perform basic arithmetic by the age of 10.¹ One of the key contributors to this crisis is the lack of access to pre-primary education, particularly in underserved rural communities. Without a strong foundation in the early years, children often enter primary school unprepared — socially, emotionally, and academically. As a result, dropout rates are high, with nearly 30% of children leaving school by grade 1.²

These outcomes highlight the urgent need for comprehensive early childhood development programs in rural Uganda — initiatives that not only provide access, but also deliver quality learning experiences. enjuba, an education social enterprise, is working to fill this gap through a sustainable, inclusive, and community-driven

model aimed at improving literacy, numeracy, and executive function skills in young children.

A Local Model With Global Lessons

At the heart of enjuba's early learning strategy is a pioneering lab preschool located in Kasangati, Uganda. This school offers high-quality early learning opportunities while also serving as a professional development hub for teachers and a site for action research on effective early childhood practices. It reflects an approach that balances literacy development with the cultivation of executive function skills — such as self-regulation, working memory, and cognitive flexibility. These skills are essential for long-term educational success.

“We view executive function skills as the very engine driving learning,” explains Lizza Marie Kawooya, Head of Early Childhood Programs at enjuba. “If we are serious about transforming



education outcomes in Uganda, we must begin with the development of these foundational skills in early childhood.”

This lab preschool serves as a demonstration site where educators, researchers, and policymakers can observe and learn from real-world classroom practices. It also informs the development of context-specific interventions designed for scaling in rural Uganda.

Scaling Access Through Public School Integration

In 2024, enjuba extended its early childhood development model to 10 public schools in Mayuge District — establishing early learning centers within existing infrastructure. This strategic integration avoids the creation of parallel systems and promotes sustainability. The adapted model maintains the core principles of the original lab preschool while being tailored to rural resource settings.

Teachers at these centers receive peer-to-peer training, enhancing their capacity to implement child-centered, play-based approaches. This model builds local human capital and fosters ongoing professional learning among early educators. Importantly, enjuba openly shares its curriculum and learning resources, contributing to systemic improvement across the Ugandan education system.

By embedding early childhood development programs into public schools, enjuba directly contributes to answering the critical question: How do we improve literacy in Ugandan primary schools? The answer begins with a stronger foundation — one that prioritizes both academic and social-emotional development in the preschool years.



Strengthening Literacy Through Culturally Relevant Materials

Beyond classrooms, enjuba is addressing a crucial barrier to literacy: the lack of engaging, age-appropriate reading materials that reflect the lives of Ugandan children. Through a national network of over 300 libraries, the organization provides access to affordable children’s books with Ugandan characters, supporting early reading both at school and at home. These resources help foster a sense of identity and relevance, increasing motivation and confidence among young readers.

Literacy interventions for struggling readers are also part of enjuba’s broader programming, ensuring that children who fall behind receive timely support to help them catch up. Together, these efforts form a comprehensive ecosystem of support that reaches children, teachers, and families alike.

Community Ownership and Long-Term Sustainability

A core strength of enjuba’s model is its deep community involvement. Programs are co-designed with local stakeholders — including parents, teachers, and school leaders. This co-creation ensures that interventions are grounded in local realities. Parent engagement sessions promote home-based learning and reinforce the value of early education. Meanwhile, collaborative teacher training sessions create space for reflection, shared learning, and professional growth.

This community-driven approach not only fosters ownership, but also supports long-term sustainability. By leveraging existing infrastructure and building local capacity, the program significantly reduces implementation costs and avoids dependency on external actors.



In contrast to many well-intentioned but short-lived education interventions, enjuba's model is built to last. Continuous learning is embedded into the process. The lab preschool acts as a research hub where new strategies are piloted and refined before being scaled. Insights from classroom observations, teacher feedback, and child assessments inform ongoing program adjustments, keeping the model relevant and effective.

Impact and Potential

Though still early in its expansion, the initiative is already yielding promising outcomes. These include improved school readiness, enhanced teacher competence, and increased parental involvement. More important, it offers a replicable model for organizations supporting education in Uganda and other low-resource settings.

By focusing on early intervention, teacher empowerment, and community collaboration, enjuba is directly addressing the systemic barriers that hinder learning. Their work clearly demonstrates the impact of early childhood education on primary school success in Uganda, and offers valuable insights for global education stakeholders seeking to promote literacy, equity, and sustainability.

A Vision for the Future

enjuba's vision is a future in which every child in Uganda — regardless of their geography or socioeconomic status — has access to high-quality early education that equips them to thrive. As Aisha and her classmates in Mayuge explore, question, and grow, they are going beyond learning to read and count. They are building the executive function skills that will empower them for life.

Their joyful discovery affirms a critical truth: Literacy is not just about decoding words; it is about unlocking potential. When education is treated as a right, not a privilege, it becomes a powerful force for justice, opportunity, and transformation.

Notes:

¹ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/2588316162286391/pdf/Will-Every-Child-Be-Able-to-Read-by-2030-Defining-Learning-Poverty-and-Mapping-the-Dimensions-of-the-Challenge.pdf>

² Ministry of Education & Sports. (2017). *The education and sports sector annual performance report, financial year 2016/17*. Author.

Disclosure Statement:

The author is an employee of enjuba.