REAL
Research for Equitable Access and Learning

ESSA
Education Sub Saharan Africa

Enhancing Africa-Led Research on

Early Childhood Development, and Foundational Learning

VOICES OF AFRICA-BASED RESEARCHERS

Authors: Krista Samson, Samuel Asare, and Pauline Essah

November 2023

Acknowledgement

Suggested Citation

Samson, K., Asare, S., Essah, P. (2023). *Enhancing Africa-led Research on Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning: Voices of Africa-based Researchers*. Education Sub Saharan Africa (ESSA) and Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre. Workshop Report.

Cover Photo credit: Tomás Sanimbo via Pexels

Highlights
of recommendations

The two-day workshop organised in Kenya in October 2023 focused on the theme: *Enhancing Africa-led Research on Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Foundational Learning (FL)*. It brought together 53 invited education stakeholders, mainly researchers but also funders, policymakers, and practitioners from sub-Saharan Africa to deliberate on ways to enhance Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Foundational Learning (FL) research in Africa. Participants shared their research priority themes and professional development needs as well as ways stakeholders can work together to address identified needs/challenges. In this section, we bring you highlights of recommendations for ECD and FL stakeholders to better support researchers in sub-Saharan Africa.

Starting with ECD specific recommendations, participants suggested the need for better collaboration between/among sectors that work on different aspects of ECD such as health, nutrition, education and social protection to ensure coordinated programmes for holistic development of children. In addition, there was a recognition that ECD is relatively recent in terms of priority in Africa. This requires investment in technical expertise for researchers to better conduct relevant and high-quality research.

Regarding FL, discussion focused on the need for more research investment to better understand ways to improve the language of instruction and fostering multilingualism in learning spaces. Like ECD, participants recommended multi-sectoral approach to addressing low literacy and numeracy outcomes. For example, parents and communities should be provided with the knowledge and skills to contribute to children learning. It was also recommended for teaching to take a multidisciplinary approach to benefit from knowledge in various disciplines to enhance learning.

Aside ECD and FL specific recommendations, participants provided those applicable to both. For instance, a creation of data hubs where African data would be available and accessible. Also, to ensure funding is brought to Africa and given to African scholars, structures that would ensure transparency and accountability need to be created. This includes funders understanding the African context without basing their accountability benchmarks on the western standards. The full list of recommendations for ECD and FL, as well as cross-cutting ones, can be found on pages 18 and 19.

Table of

Contents

List of
Acronyms

AfECN	Africa Early Childhood Network
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECR	Early Career Researcher
ESSA	Education Sub Saharan Africa
FL	Foundational Learning
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
REAL	Research for Equitable Access and Learning
MELQO	Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organization

Introduction

This report summarises key recommendations from an in-person workshop organised by the not-for-profit organisation **Education Sub Saharan Africa (ESSA)** and the **Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre** at the University of Cambridge. The event took place on 5th and 6th October 2023 in Nairobi, Kenya, and focused on the theme: *Enhancing Africa-led Research on Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Foundational Learning (FL).* The workshop brought together 53 invited education stakeholders, mainly researchers but also funders, policymakers, and practitioners from sub-Saharan Africa to deliberate on ways to enhance Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Foundational Learning (FL) research in Africa. The discussions focused on ECD encompassing education, health, nutrition, play, caregiving and environment and protection of children, and FL focusing on numeracy and literacy as well as socio-emotional skills development of primary school children. Specifically, the objectives of the workshop were to:

a. **Enhance understanding of the specific needs and priorities of Africa-based Early Childhood Development and Foundational Learning researchers.**

b. **Discuss and propose practical strategies for education stakeholders (e.g., the Africa-based researchers, education leaders, funders, and policymakers) to address the needs and priorities identified above.**

c. **Increase interactions among the Africa-based researchers and other stakeholders and create opportunities for South-South collaboration/networking.**

This report builds on recommendations outlined in an earlier **report** from an online version of the workshop held on 19th April 2023. In the next two sections, we provide overview of participants and share what we learned from the plenary sessions and small group discussions. Then, we outline recommendations drawing on data from the plenary sessions and small group discussions. We will group the recommendations into three: ECD recommendations, FL recommendations, and cross cutting recommendations. The last section will focus on what we intend to do next.
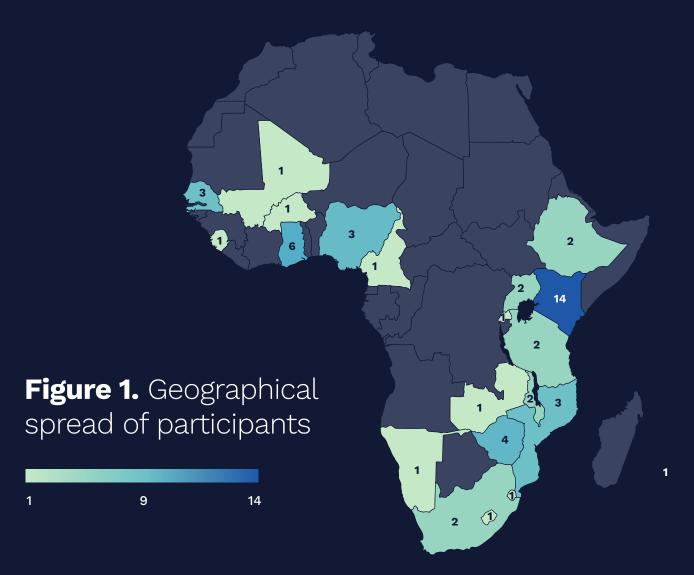
Overview
of participants

We invited participants based on specified criteria comprising gender, geographical location, language, and area of expertise. We also made a conscious effort to include early career researchers. In line with our fixed budget targeting 50 participants, we invited a little over 100 people (in stages, based on responses from those contacted initially). Fifty-three attended, comprising 23 men and 30 women from 21 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. As captured in Figure 1, the number of participants from Kenya was more than twice the number of Ghana, the second highest country. This is mainly because the event was held in Kenya and as such, we received last minute requests from individuals and partners in Kenya to attend and granted them access. The map also reflects ESSA and REAL Centre's networks, which are stronger in Anglophone countries. We will continue our efforts to increase representation from Francophone and Lusophone countries for future events, subject to resources available.

Figure 1. Geographical spread of participants

1   9   14

What we learned

from the workshop's plenary presentations and small group discussions

In this section we present a synthesis of insights from the plenary presentations and small group discussions. The plenary provided spaces for panel discussions and individual presentations on various aspects of the workshop theme. In addition to the plenary, we divided participants into six groups, with each group having between six and ten members. One of the groups was dedicated to participants from Francophone Africa who preferred to engage with each other in French. We did not create a separate group for the two Lusophone participants from Mozambique because there was no request for it as they could speak both French and English. The aim of the small group discussions was to provide an opportunity for deeper discussion of the workshop objectives and plenary presentations.

The insights from these engagements are presented under four topics: research priority themes; influence of research priorities by national, regional, and global education agendas; professional development needs/challenges; and the ways in which stakeholders can address the identified needs/challenges.

1.1 Research priority themes

In both the plenary and small group discussions, participants shared their areas of research covering a wide range of topics focusing on both ECD and FL, but from different contexts across sub-Saharan Africa. These areas of research are presented under six broad themes comprising: learning and assessment; access to equitable, and inclusive child development; teachers and teaching; language and curriculum; institutional leadership, culture and facilities; information and communication technology; policy and financing; and health and nutrition.

a. Learning and assessment

Views were expressed regarding diverse factors related to student learning and experiences, including student motivation and student voice, learning outcomes, and forms of summative and formative assessment at the classroom, school, national and international level. Participants also expressed the importance of family and community in children's learning and general wellbeing. As such, interventions need to be put in place to better support families and communities as they support and care for children learning at an early age.

Additionally, the literacy and learning outcomes in the early years need to be improved. This can be done by developing contextually relevant tools (e.g., questionnaires), rather than relying solely on Western tools. A participant highlighted Ethiopia's Measuring Early Learning Quality & Outcomes (MELQO) tool, which was developed in the United States but adapted to the Ethiopian/African context by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and is now used as a national assessment tool.

Finally, it is essential to measure exactly how much children are learning and how ready they are to learn in the first place. To measure this, quality assurance processes and mechanisms should be put in place to standardise interventions.

b. Access to equitable and inclusive child development

Education must be more equitable and inclusive for all young learners, particularly in ECD where there are some challenges related to inclusivity, principally in childcare and health centres. Important areas of research include better understanding of those who get access and those struggling because of poverty and location. Specifically, how out-of-school children with disabilities and those living in refugee camps can be supported to access quality education and health.

To make learning more inclusive, participants expressed the need for collaboration with local communities. A community's traditional way of life must be integrated into a child's learning space. There is also the question of how to apply ECD in conflict zones. Even amid conflict, a child's development must still be paid attention to and prioritised.

Discussions focused on improving access to good nutrition and healthcare. How can healthcare be improved to provide access to children in rural and poor urban areas?

c. Teachers and teaching

Teachers and their work, including pedagogical approaches and instructional practices in the classroom; teacher education, knowledge and skills; are very important areas for research. Issues around teacher processes of recruiting and training teachers must be well understood to ensure that those who enter teaching have a passion for the profession and a commitment to service. They need to also possess socioemotional skills to care for learners from different socioeconomic levels, or those who experience difficulties intellectually or socially.

Generally, the teaching strategies used should also be gender-informed and particularly in the case of ECD, they should also be multi-sectoral. Additionally, teachers need to consider cultural and social backgrounds of students in teaching to make teaching and learning relevant to students as well as to help students feel like they are a part of the teaching and learning process.

d. Language and curriculum

Learning begins with language and proceeds through it. As such, access becomes critical when children are not taught in the language they understand. What approaches or how are teachers skilled or equipped to use language to support children living in multilingual communities? How do we improve the languages of instruction in schools? And how do we introduce the use of the child's mother tongue, and promote multilingualism, especially for children learning in a second language? There is the need for curriculum to draw on local knowledge and resources to make education relevant for local communities and encourage participation. For example, what teaching materials are available in the community?

e. Institutional leadership, culture, and facilities

Participants mentioned that research needs to look into institutional factors outside the classroom: leadership and management at the school and system level; institutional culture. For example, how can safe learning spaces be created for all children? Multisectoral collaboration for ECD should also be encouraged, both across the components and all the stakeholders, including educators, parents, policymakers, funders, and researchers.

f. Information and communication technology (ICT)

The use of ICT in teaching and learning was identified as an important avenue to increase access and learning as well manage information and data. There were discussions around how technology should be incorporated more in classrooms to ensure young children are learning with it and developing the relevant skills in this digital age. Also, others expressed concern about the possibility of technology creating inequity in learning due to poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds should be supported to benefit from technology.

g. Policy and financing

Partnerships and collaboration among all key stakeholders, including state and non-state actors, need to be strengthened. There needs to also be greater advocacy to strengthen political will for policy development and sustainable implementation. Furthermore, financing for ECD must be increased, particularly in countries where there is limited research on this, such as in Sierra Leone. To help gather information on the state of ECD, which will provide better direction, a situational analysis must be conducted. Also, flexible policies on language that will benefit all children need to be introduced. This will ensure teaching and learning occur effectively, especially for children from low-income households.

h. Health and nutrition

Participants highlighted the need for greater focus on special needs education. One way of doing this would be to ensure early identification and intervention for learners with special needs. There also needs to be a stronger focus on the mental health and psychosocial support being given to young children. Multidisciplinary research, particularly neuroscience and developmental psychology, should be promoted. Also, research focusing on the nurturing care and related frameworks should form key components for programmes aimed at enhancing child development. Participants also drew attention to research and communication about healthy local foods for children and ways to improve hygiene to reduce child mortality and morbidity resulting from poor hygiene practices.

1.2 Influence of research priorities by national, regional, and global education agendas

Discussion revealed that what is researched is influenced by a wide range of policy agendas. However, global policy agendas seem to have the most influence. For example, the Nurturing Care Framework by UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank drives research priorities in most countries, especially those in East Africa. It was clear from the discussions that the main reasons for researchers to follow international agendas was funding. As revealed in the presentations at the workshop, the majority of funding comes from international sources. Notwithstanding this, national and regional agendas influence research in the region. For example, in Tanzania, the government allocates funding to support research areas prioritised by the African Union. Also, in Kenya, the government policy on competency-based framework attracts lots of research.

1.3 Professional development needs/challenges

Enhancing Africa-led research requires an environment that supports researchers to thrive and undertake high-quality research. However, in many contexts, the needs of researchers are not addressed adequately. Some of the needs identified were training, funding, mentorship, collaboration/partnership, and conducive (research) environments, as presented below.

a. Training

↗ Writing workshops:
- Research grant writing.
- Writing for journal publication (including peer review skills).
- Writing policy briefs.

↗ Management of research grants.

↗ Multi-disciplinary research (e.g., longitudinal study, implementation research, participatory research, action research and data analysis for quantitative and qualitative research, as well as artificial intelligence for research).

↗ Research training in other language such as Portuguese and French.

↗ Engaging with the public about research findings (e.g., parents and media) and developing a communication strategy. This includes determining the most effective modes and channels based on the audience and language.

↗ Introductory training in relevant disciplines such as child psychology, educational anthropology, social psychology, and neuroscience.

b. Funding

↗ Funding is needed for more doctoral and postdoctoral positions in African universities.

↗ More funding is also needed for capacity building/strengthening and skills enhancement, for instance a fund writing retreat to ensure dedicated time for writing. Therefore, researchers should be able to embed requests for such activities in applications for funding.

↗ More research needs to be conducted in languages other than English, such as French and Portuguese. Also, findings for research conducted in English could be translated into French, Portuguese, and other local languages for easy access. However, funding is required for such important work.

c. Mentorship

↗ Mentorship (engaging senior academics to support early career researchers for the long term – up to five years).

↗ Including budget line for mentorship in funding proposals.

↗ Funders should include mentorship as a principle in funding calls/ large grants, including those for PhD studentships and early career researchers.

e. Advocacy

↗ There is a need for advocacy for increased funding using avenues such as social media and academic platforms.

↗ Help researchers become more visible and improve the recognition of their work.

↗ Researchers should be more involved in advocacy work by engaging policymakers throughout their research process up to dissemination. However, they should also conduct research to answer policy questions, including evaluating government policies and pronouncements.

d. Collaboration/partnership

↗ Exchange programmes for doctoral students, early career, and female researchers within Africa and abroad.

↗ A database of researchers and funders to share ideas and enhance collaboration.

↗ Skills for networking and use of social media to enhance visibility.

↗ Establishment of networks to share ideas and encourage collaboration.

↗ Intentional training on networking: orientate people on how to network and enrol in mentoring and coaching programmes.

↗ Need for a regional research agenda to enhance South-South collaboration.

↗ Travel should be made less strenuous for researchers. Simplifying the visa process for conference attendance and study visits to other countries would be helpful.

1.4 How stakeholders can address the researchers' identified needs/challenges

During the small group **discussions, participants suggested the ways education stakeholders such as researchers, funders, education leaders and policymakers, could address the needs and challenges identified in the section above.**

One of the key points discussed across the different small groups was the **need for increased research funding, specifically domestic funding, rather than international funding.** Funding for research in Africa should be allocated to African scholars based in African institutions and aligned with their interests and priorities. Additionally, funding should not only target government and universities as is usually the case. It should also target local Non-governmental Organisations that understand the community, are able to create a rapport with locals, and thus deliver better results. Such funding should ideally be for long term programmes and include post-project/programme activities such as conference participation, writing of policy briefs, etc. Funders were encouraged to consider outsourcing funding calls and management to reduce the administrative burden and bureaucracy.

Another point discussed was the need for **the creation of centres of excellence and data hubs** where African data will be readily available and accessible to African researchers. These centres will give African scholars the opportunity to collaborate amongst themselves, while also serving as avenues they can turn to for capacity building/strengthening and professional development. By collaborating with each other, scholars will also boost their credibility, as they leverage on each other's strengths and expertise.

Finally, there is a need **to develop a comprehensive database profiling African researchers working in ECD and FL, along with their research**. Mapping and capturing such information in a database will help to identify all the gaps and deficiencies in ECD and FL research across the continent, which will in turn guide researchers on the areas they need to focus their research. Similarly, there is the need to profile and catalogue regional needs in Africa, which could prove useful when funders are looking for researchers and/or research areas to fund.

Recommendations for action

The recommendations presented here are drawn from various panel discussions, as well as small group discussions, and are grouped into three categories: those focusing on Early Childhood Development specifically, those focusing on Foundational Learning specifically, and the cross-cutting ones.

1 ECD recommendations

✔ Create a database to profile ECD funders and make it available to African researchers.

✔ Regional researchers and their needs should be profiled, e.g., by the African Early Childhood Network (AfECN) to ensure that funders know exactly where to go when they are looking for researchers and priority areas to invest in.

✔ There should be better collaboration among sectors that work on different aspects of ECD. This collaboration will help with the holistic development of a child.

✔ Create targeted ECD journals, not just for academia but also for policy papers and practise.

✔ With ECD being a relatively new area in Africa, there is the need for technical expertise and investment for researchers to help them conduct research. This is particularly important considering that many researchers in Africa conduct more theoretical research, while the global north focuses on action research and longitudinal studies.

2

FL recommendations

✅ Advance research focused on improving the language of instruction and fostering multilingualism in learning spaces.

✅ Develop a multi-sectoral approach to addressing phenomena in education, allowing for a more holistic problem-solving approach.

✅ There needs to be better collaboration and the breaking down of barriers between disciplines to enhance an interdisciplinary approach to problem-solving, rather than working in silos.

✅ Further discussion for clarity of the concept of foundational literacy and numeracy/foundational learning, especially from the African context.

3

Cross-cutting recommendations

✅ Develop a database of African ECD and FL researchers to help identify gaps and deficiencies across Africa. From this, researchers can suggest to funders how funding can strengthen these databases.

✅ Create data hubs where African data would be accessible and available. African scholars will be able to apply to these hubs for their professional development and have the opportunity to collaborate with other scholars.

✅ To ensure funding is brought to Africa and given to African scholars, structures that would ensure transparency and accountability need to be created. This includes funders understanding the African context without basing their accountability benchmarks on the western standards.

✅ There should be more collaboration and partnership among African researchers, allowing them to boost their credibility while leveraging each other's strengths and expertise.

✅ Establish new networks (or, strengthen existing ones) for ECD and FL researchers.

✅ Create an association of African educational researchers, with the mandate to lobby or advocate for positive change and raise funds.

✅ Co-create research agenda at continental, regional and national levels to initiate interdisciplinary research.

✅ Share information (e.g., work and other opportunities available) with other researchers. This can be done by creating and using shared platforms, including workshops, social media, academic platforms such as ResearchGate, and Google Alerts for sharing.

✅ Researchers need to have closer engagements with policymakers and strengthen the awareness of policymakers (and local businesses) about evidence-informed policymaking. This could enable policymakers to better understand the importance of evidence use in policymaking and action, which could result in increased public funding for research.

✅ Early Career Researchers should include a social value in funding proposals i.e., mentorship for early career researchers. When an early career researcher submits a research funding proposal, he/she should include a budget for a mentor who will be dedicated to helping them to increase their funding application success rate. As an example, J-PAL connects early career researchers with mentors.

Next steps

These recommendations will guide future engagements with stakeholders and events. In particular, ESSA and REAL Centre will start implementing some of the recommendations subject to available budget and advice from the projects' advisory committee. Additionally, we aim to feature more articles about the workshop on an international platform like Devex to further highlight the significant discussions. Lastly, by the end of April 2024, ESSA and the REAL Centre will prepare a consolidated report. It will draw on insights from this report, the online survey, in person and online expert consultations, and the online workshop held on 19th April 2023. This document will develop long-term outcomes by drawing on those multiple data to provide concrete steps to support education researchers in sub-Saharan Africa to do more high-quality policy relevant research that will improve learning outcomes for all.

The findings will also contribute to the Enhancing Education Research in Africa **(EERA)** project. This project aims to determine the prerequisites for establishing a strong and sustainable African education research system and design funding pathways to strengthen education research in Africa.

Contact

For further information please contact ESSA at **researchenquiries@essa-africa.org**, or the REAL Centre at **REALCentre@educ.cam.ac.uk.**

Appendix A:
List of speakers, moderators, facilitators and note takers

Speakers

- **Ms Izel Kipruto,**
  Head of Communications, ESSA

- **Dr Pauline Essah,**
  Director of Research and Programmes, ESSA

- **Ms Emis Njeru,**
  Early Childhood Education, Ministry of Education, Kenya

- **Dr Casely Olabode Stephens,**
  Policy Officer, Education, Science, Technology & Innovation Department, African Union

- **Mr Daniel Hawkins Iddrisu,**
  Research Assistant, REAL Centre, University of Cambridge

- **Dr Eunice Mueni Williams,**
  Research Associate, REAL Centre, University of Cambridge

- **Dr Hélène Binesse,**
  Research Associate, REAL Centre, University of Cambridge

- **Dr Samuel Asare,**
  Senior Research Manager (AERD), ESSA

- **Professor Hellen Inyega,**
  Professor and Consultant – Language, Literacy, Numeracy, Specia and Early Childhood Education, University of Nairobi, Kenya

- **Mr Moses Abiero,**
  Programme Manager, Africa Early Childhood Network, Kenya

- **Dr Mary Goretti Nakabugo,**
  Executive Director, Uwezo Uganda, Uganda

- **Dr John Mugo,**
  Executive Director, Zizi Afrique Foundation, Kenya

- **Professor Ndabaga Eugene,**
  University of Rwanda, Rwanda

- **Ms Kolosa Nonkenge,**
  Assistant Director, Department of Basic Education, South Africa

- **Professor Belay Hagos,**
  Associate Professor, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

- **Ms Lilies Njanga,**
  Program Officer, East and Southern Africa, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.

Moderators

- **Dr Hudson Ong'ang'a,**
  Senior Lecturer, Kenyatta University, Kenya

- **Professor Efua Irene,**
  Amenyah Sarr, Gaston Berger University, Senegal

- **Ms Esme Kadzamira,**
  Research Fellow, Centre for Educational Research and Training, University of Malawi

- **Dr Might Abreh,** Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Educational Planning and Administration, University of Cape Coast.

Facilitators

- **Ms Elizabeth Mbatudde**,
  Assistant Commissioner, Early Childhood Care and Education/Pre-primary Education, Ministry of Education, Uganda

- **Dr Margaret Nampijja,**
  Developmental Psychologist, African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC), Kenya

- **Professor Esmeranda Manful,**
  Associate Professor, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana

- **Ms Virginia Ngindiru,**
  Director of Programs, Zizi Afrique Foundation, Kenya

- **Dr Cheick Felix Bobodo Ouedrago,**
  Researcher, Université Joseph KI-ZERBO, Burkina Faso

- **Ms Nangamso Mtsatse**,
  Stellenbosch University, South Africa

- **Dr Jerome Nketsiah,**
  Lecturer, Foso College of Education, Ghana

- **Dr Trust Gangaidzo,**
  Centre for Health Policy, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

- **Dr Adefunke Ekine,**
  Deputy Director Research and External Relations, Tai Solarin University of Education, Nigeria

- **Ms Marciline Kanda,**
  Gateway Christian Training College, Zimbabwe

- **Professor Ernest Kofi Davis,**
  University of Cape Coast, Ghana

- **Dr Idrissa Soïba Traoré,**
  Senior Lecturer, University of Letters and Human Sciences of Bamako, Mali.

Note takers

- **Dr Thierno Malick Diallo,**
  Research Manager, Education Sub Saharan Africa (ESSA), Senegal

- **Dr Eunice Mueni Williams,**
  Research Associate, REAL Centre, University of Cambridge

- **Dr Hélène Binesse,**
  Research Associate, REAL Centre, University of Cambridge

- **Mr Daniel Hawkins Iddrisu,**
  Research Assistant, REAL Centre, University of Cambridge.

Enhancing Africa-Led
Research on

Early Childhood Development, and Foundational Learning

@ESSA_Africa
@REAL_Centre

www.essa-africa.org
www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/real/