

Assessing the provision of Early Childhood Education in Government Primary Schools. A Case of selected schools in Kabompo District of North Western Zambia.

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ABSTRACT

The study assessed the provision of Early Childhood Education in selected government primary schools of Kabompo District. A case study design was used involving a sample of 70 respondents selected from three Early Childhood Education Centres in Kabompo district, with geographic locations of urban, peri-urban and rural and remote primary schools.

Data were collected using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation schedules and ECE class check-lists. Qualitative data were analysed thematically while quantitative data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate graphs, charts and frequency tables.

The study observed that there were several factors affecting the provision of ECE in government primary schools most of which were attributed to identified gaps between policy on Early Childhood Education provision and practice. Some schools did not have trained teachers in ECE centres but used volunteer primary school teachers. The study also found that ECE centres did not have appropriate infrastructure designed for children below the age of six. Most schools were under resourced with respect to teaching and learning materials including materials for play. For rural and remote schools, long distances between schools and villages resulted in minimal enrolment and rampant absenteeism. On the contrary, some urban ECE centres experienced high enrolment rates resulting in overcrowding in classrooms. The study recommended inter alia that the Ministry of Education should build appropriate infrastructure for ECE and procure the requisite materials including relevant equipment for play in ECE Centres.

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education has emerged as an important theme in the international dialogue on education in recent years. This is due to scientific findings which suggest that early years of child development are critical in the formation of intelligence, personality and social behavior. Jenkins (2005) posits that critical brain development in one's life occurs in the first five years of life. He further indicates that studies in brain development have shown that most childhood vulnerabilities in the first three years are preventable. Early childhood education experiences positively affect later home and school involvement in education. A child who fails to acquire early education may suffer emotionally, socially, intellectually and even physically if he/she enters primary school without a sustainable early childhood education experience that would give him/her a solid foundation in the primary school. As a result, investing in ECE provides greater returns through increased enrollment, retention, achievement, and completion of primary school level.

In Zambia, early childhood education dates back to 1957 when the Nurseries Day Care Act was enacted to regulate day care facilities by the colonial administration. As the field evolved, a parallel system emerged with one concentrating on the care and the other on the education of young children (Matafwali & Mofu, 2022). Children aged 5-6 years were offered preschool services in organised settings popularly known as

'hoolofeya' the local pronunciation for 'welfare' under the Ministry of Local Government and Housing after independence. The privately owned day care centres offered child care services to younger children under the age of five at a cost. Only the affluent could afford such services. The post-independence period saw a paradigm shift in the delivery of preschool services, with the government taking charge of teacher training only and resource development (Ministry of Education, 1977). Meanwhile service provision was solely left in the hands of the private sector. In 2004, the mandate for ECE was shifted from the Ministry of Local Government and Housing to the Ministry of Education through a Government Gazette in 2004. ECE has gradually been integrated into the national education structure as a foundation to lifelong learning (MoE,1996). In 2012, the Patriotic Front (PF) government led by President Michael Sata rebranded the Ministry of General Education as the Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MoESVTEE) taking a proactive role in the delivery of ECE as a regulator and service provider. Policy initiatives in some schools such as mandatory provision of ECE in public primary schools have yielded positive results with the number of children attending ECE centres gradually increasing (Matafwali, 2022). In 2013, a revised national curriculum was introduced which laid out broad principles for ECE. Unlike the previous ECE guidelines, the 2013 curriculum framework embraced a theoretical departure in terms of pedagogy practice in ECE curriculum guidelines from the didactic approach to a Vygotskian social – cultural approach where children are seen as active participants in the learning process. Vygotsky's social-cultural theory recognizes the interplay between play, imagination, creativity, realistic reasoning and child development (Nilsson, Ferholt and Lecusay, 2018). Consequently, the idea of learning through play has since dominated ECE discourse in Zambia. The 2013 Curriculum allocates 60% of the learning experiences in ECE classrooms to play-based learning which fundamentally makes play and ECCDE complimentary. Play is an important component of child development as learning in the early years is influenced by the various kinds of experiences that children are exposed to through play activities.

As earlier stated, ECE has been included within the mainstream education system in Zambia because not only does it serve the purpose of giving the child daily care while parents are at work, it also contributes towards the child's social and intellectual development. Children who participate in pre-school are more likely to enroll and remain in primary school, and achieve better results than those who cannot access comprehensive early childhood care. Further, early gains in school readiness due to early childhood education have been shown to have enormous positive economic and social impacts lasting well into adulthood, from higher educational attainment and less chance of involvement in criminal activity, to higher status employment and higher earnings (Schweinhart, 2007). This study, therefore, sought to explore factors affecting the provision of Early Childhood Education in the mainstream government primary schools in Kabompo district of North Western Province of Zambia.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Following the directive by the Ministry of Education to introduce Early Childhood Education Centres in primary schools, some government schools started the implementation of ECE in their schools. However, it appears there is a dearth of information on how Early Childhood Education is being provided in the mainstream primary school system especially in the rural parts of the country. For this reason, this study sought to assess the provision of ECE in selected government primary schools of Kabompo District in North Western Zambia.

Research Questions

1. What are the perspectives of primary teachers and head teachers on the provision of ECE in Kabompo district?
2. What role does the District Education Board play in ensuring effective implementation of the ECE policy in Kabompo?
3. What are the challenges in the implementation of ECE in Kabompo District?

4. How do parents and other stakeholders view the provision of ECE in government primary schools?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and structured interviews. This design was preferred as the researcher intended to get detailed information from key informants.

Target Population

The study targeted teachers from five primary schools that have begun implementing ECE. The target population comprised ECE class teachers, school managers, the Ministry of Education authorities at district level, parents and other stakeholders in Kabompo District.

Sample Size

A sample of 70 participants from urban, peri-urban and rural or remote primary schools was used. The sample consisted of 40 class teachers, 3 head teachers, 3 ECE teachers, 2 officers from the District Education Office and a combination of 22 parents and other stakeholders.

Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select key informants such as Head teachers, ECE class teachers, the DEBS (District Education Board Secretary) and parents of pre-school children. According to Kombo and Tromp (2006), purposive sampling targets only the people believed to be reliable for the study. Newbold (2007) asserts that when the desired population for the study is rare or very difficult to locate and recruit for a study, purposive sampling may be the only option. He further argues that purposive sampling can be very useful for situations where you need to reach a targeted sample quickly and where a sampling for proportionate is not a primary concern.

Instruments for Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews from primary school teachers and head teachers, while observation schedules and check-lists were used to collect information from ECE class teachers. Interview guides were followed to gather information from parents and officers from the District Education Board.

Procedure for Data Collection

Questionnaires were distributed to all participants. Participants who were visually impaired or illiterate were assisted by reading out the questions to them. Questionnaires were then collected from respondents by the researcher for data analysis. Class observations were conducted in ECE centres to get in-depth information. Interviews were recorded with permission from participants.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data was collected from informants using semi-structured interviews and open ended questions in structured interviews. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The analysis involved going through the contents of the in-depth explanations given by the key informants and presenting them in a narrative form. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, tables and charts were generated by SPSS.

Ethical Consideration

This study considered the following ethical issues, among others: permission was sought from all participants/respondents before they were interviewed or had a questionnaire administered to them. This ensured freedom of expression, and that nothing was said or written other than what they knew and believed in.

At the sites where permission was granted, the expected respondents were briefed about the procedures to be used, and the value of the research. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assured that no names would be used on the interview schedules and questionnaires; serial numbers would be used instead. In this manner, all participants' details were treated anonymous. They were also assured that data to be collected would not be disclosed to other persons, and that the data would only be used for academic purpose. To ensure that school programmes were not interrupted, interviews and questionnaires were administered outside class learning hours.

Researcher bias

One of the members in the research team was a teacher at one of the sampled primary schools with an annexed ECE Centre, the researcher may have had his own expectations and observations which may have had an effect on the outcomes of the study findings; some of the participants in the study had already interacted with the researcher before the study was conducted. As such the results may also, in a way, be affected by the researcher's subjectivity. However, throughout the study, the researcher worked at ensuring that information gathered during the study process was only used to come up with the results of the study to ensure that the researcher bias was reduced to a minimal level.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table 1: Respondents by Geographic Location (n=70)

Location	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Urban	28	40
Peri-urban	24	34.3
Rural/Remote	18	25.7
Total	70	100

The table above shows the distribution of respondents by geographic location. The majority, 28 (40%) were drawn from the urban ECE centre; the number includes even the district education management officials. Peri-urban involved 24 (34.3%) while the rural/remote had 18 (25.7). Low staffing levels in remote schools could have accounted for the minimal number of respondents. In fact, the majority of respondents in the remote ECE centre were parents and other stakeholders.

Table 2: Respondents by sex (n=70)

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	38	54.3
Female	32	45.7
Total	70	100

As can be seen from the table above, most of the respondents, 38 (54.3%), were male while 32 (45.7%) were female. This implies that there were more male teachers in urban schools as compared to rural and remote schools at the time of the study; this is contrary to the picture of schools in urban provinces which have more female teachers in urban schools and more male teachers in peri-urban or rural schools.

Table 3: Age Range of Respondents (n = 40)

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
20-30	08	20
31-40	23	57.5
41-50	06	15
51 and above	03	7.5
Total	40	100

Participants were asked to indicate their ages. It is clear from the table above that most of the participants, 23 (57.5%), were in the age range of 31 to 40 years, implying that they were mature and experienced enough in the Ministry of Education, therefore, they were capable and suitable enough to provide information on matters of Early Childhood Education provision in government primary schools of Kabompo District, 8 (20%) were in the age range 20-30, 6 (15%) of respondents indicated that they were in the age range of between 41 –50 years old while 3 (7.5%) were 51 and above.

Table 4: Marital status(n=40)

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Married	33	82.5
Single	06	15
Divorced	01	2.5
Separated	00	00
Widowed	00	00
Total	40	100

From the table above, it is clear that the majority, 33 (82.5%), of the participants were married, suggesting that some could have even enrolled their children in ECE centres annexed to Government Primary Schools. Hence such parents could be reliable in providing authentic information on the topic for the study, while 6 (15%) were single and 1 (2.5%) were divorced.

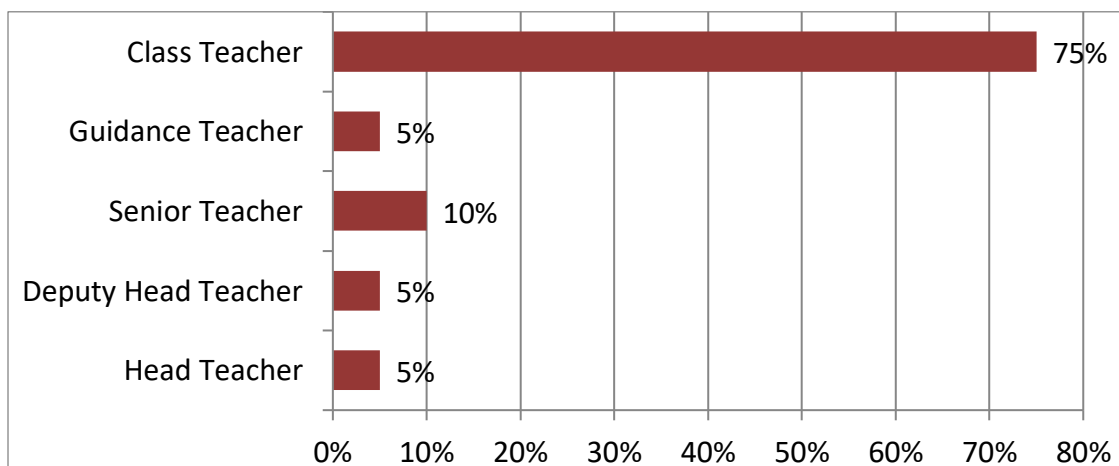


Figure 1: Substantive positions (n =40)

Participants indicated various positions which they held at their places of work. As can be seen from the graph above, out of 40 respondents, 30 (75%) were class teachers, 4 (10%) were senior teachers, 2 (5%) were head teachers, 2 (5%) were deputy head teachers and 2 (5%) were guidance teachers.

Table 5: Number of Years served in current position (n = 40)

Period of Service	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0-10	27	67.5
11-20	09	22.5
21-30	04	10
31 and above	00	00
TOTAL	40	100

As can be noted from the table above, most of the participants, 27 (67.5%), implying that they had served for a relatively shorter period in their current positions. However, they witnessed the inception of Early Childhood Education in the mainstream government primary schools. Therefore, they were in a better position to provide information about factors affecting the provision of ECE in Kabompo district, 9 (22.5%) indicated that the number of years they had served in their current position was in the range 11 -20 years while 4 (10%) served between 21 – 30 years.

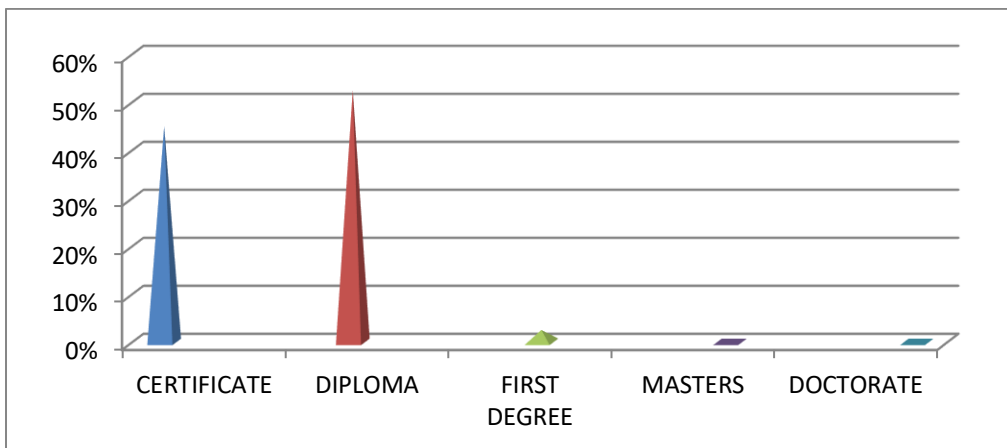


Figure 2: Academic qualifications (n=40)

Participants were further asked to indicate their highest academic qualifications. As can be seen from the graph above, 21 (52.5%) of the participants indicated that they were Diploma holders while 18 (45%) were Certificate holders. Only 1 (2.5%) were degree holders and there were no respondents with postgraduate qualifications.

It is worth mentioning that qualification of the teaching staff is key to fostering promotion and better attainment of quality at every level of education, including the high quality provision of Early Childhood Education.

Table 6: Awareness of ECE provision in government Schools (n= 40)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	40	100
No	00	00
Total	40	100

From the table above, it is clear that all the participants, 40 (100%) were aware that ECE was being

provided in some government primary schools. Hence they were all well positioned to provide adequate information on how ECE was being provided in the mainstream education system in Kabompo.

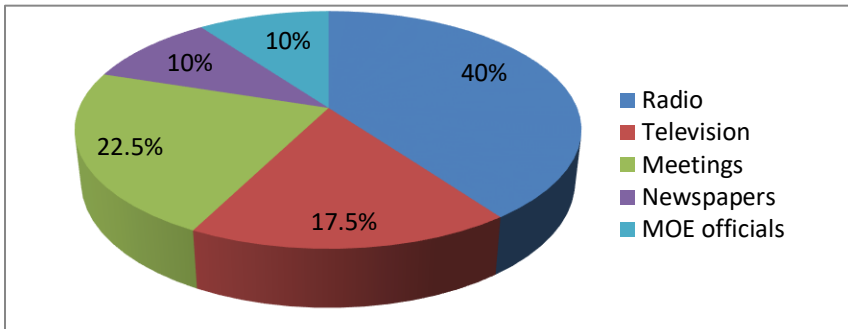


Figure 3: Sources of information (Media) on ECE provision in GRZ Schools

The pie chart above shows clearly that the majority of respondents, 16 (40%), got the information through radio broadcasts. This was followed by 9 (22.5%) representing respondents who got the information from meetings, 7 (17.5%) learnt about ECE provision in GRZ school from Television, 4 (10%) were made aware by MoE officials and 4 (10%) got the information from newspapers; these could have travelled to urban areas where print media is readily available or could have read a past newspaper.

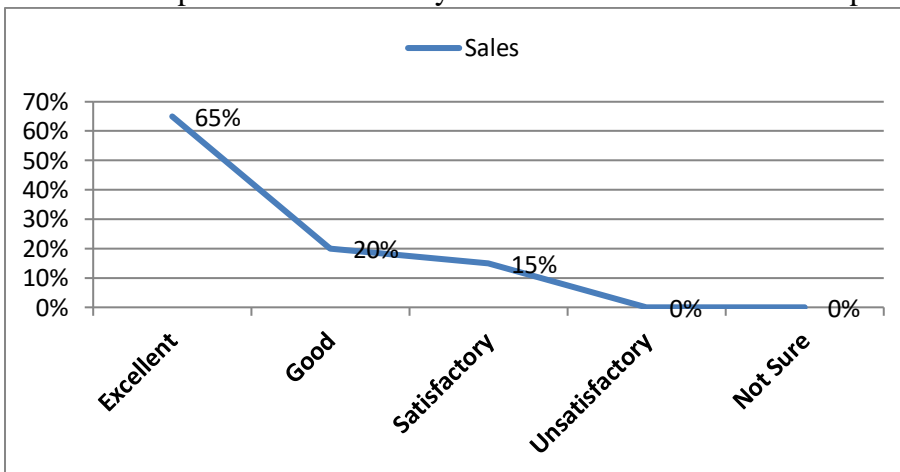


Figure 4: Views on the Implementation of ECE in government Primary schools (#=40)

The graph above shows that views of the majority 36 (65%) indicated that provision of ECE in government primary schools was an excellent move by the government. 8 (20%) said it was a good change, 6 (15%) said it was satisfactory, while none 00 (00%) indicated unsatisfactory or not being sure.

Table 7: The role played by parents in primary schools

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Got involved in PTA projects	16	42.1
Attend school meetings	8	21.1
Attend school open days	1	2.6
Contributed finances to school	6	15.8
Encouraged children to go to school	4	10.5
Helped children to do home work	2	5.3
Observed their children learn in classrooms	1	2.6
Total	38	100

Parents were asked to state various roles they played in schools. The majority 16 (42.1%) stated that they got involved in school projects, followed by 8 (21.1%) who revealed that they attended school meetings regularly. The least parental involvements were attending school open days (2.6%) and observing their children learn in classrooms (2.6%); may be these activities did not even take place in the schools under investigation.

Due to some gaps between government policy and implementation, many parents were less involved in the implementation of Early Childhood Education in Kabompo. One of the interviewed parents said,

I am very much aware that ECE is being provided in government schools since my child attends such classes as well. As a parent, I find it very difficult to provide all the requirements for my child such as school bag, shoes, clothes and the most demanding is providing packed-food every day. The readily available foods at our homes are cassava chips, groundnuts, pumpkins, maize cobs, sweet potatoes etc, but the child needs rice, macaroni, spaghetti, scorns and other expensive foods and drinks which are difficult to source. I feel it is better for my children to wait for grade 1 entry where there are less demands on school requirements.

However, some parents indicated that pre-school children were very young and that they needed to be fed regularly at home and at school.

Barriers to parent involvement in primary schools Schools

Parents disclosed that the major barrier which made them not to fully participate in the education of their children was illiteracy. Many of them said they did not know what their children were learning, and so could not help them at home even when they were given home work by teachers. Illiteracy has also made some parents have inferiority complex, so they could not frequent schools or ECE centres attended by their children.

Further, parents disclosed that some teachers kept using English when talking to them about the performance of their children. One parent asked: Why should I visit a place where there are people using a language which I do not understand? Meanwhile, the language of instruction in ECE centres according to the MoE should be the local language.

Table 8: Challenges of Implementing ECE in public Primary Schools

Challenges faced by the government	
Transport to reach remote schools	
Deployment of qualified ECE teachers	
Finances to construct suitable ECE centres	
Provision of appropriate teaching and learning materials	
Welfare of care givers is not being addressed	
Sensitization of communities about ECE provision in public schools	
Challenges faced by Schools	Challenges faced by parents/guardians
Low participation by parents	Daily provision of food
Lack of teaching and learning materials	Unavailability of medical support at the clinic.
Distances to clinics	Poverty in some homes
Irregular attendance by some children	Long distances from homes/villages to ECE centres
Abrupt absenteeism of care givers which creates vacuum	Illiteracy among some parents and guardians of pre-schoolers

Illnesses of some children	Lack of sufficient information on ECE
Lack of materials and equipment for play	Parents inability to supplement materials for play
Inappropriate infrastructure & furniture	

From the table above, it is clear that ECE provision in Kabompo is facing a lot of challenges; the findings reveal that there is less involvement by parents in the provision of ECE in Kabompo. This is in contrast with Cotton and Wikelund (1989), who contend that one of the ways through which parents can get involved in their children’s education is by actively taking part in decision making processes in the schools especially through the Parent-Teacher Associations.

Both parents and teachers indicated some challenges faced in implementing ECE in the already existing primary schools; Parents indicated that they faced several challenges, among them were long distances from home to school. Parents walked their children to school and picked them after school; Most of the parents do not have means of transport, and so they just walk. This results in some parents not having enough time to work on their fields as one parent lamented:

We shall not be producing enough food because of escorting children to schools every day; we rarely go to our fields. The government should provide transport so that children are collected from a nearby station and be brought back after school.

Forcing children to pursue education is another challenge; some children are not ready to go to school especially during the rainy season. Such children keep crying from home up to school. Even though they remain with teachers, not much can be done. Providing good clothes for preschoolers poses another challenge especially for poor parents. Children need a variety of outfits for different activities such as Physical Education. One parent said, “our children admire clothes for the rich children which they want us to buy.”

Over enrolment is one of the challenges faced by teachers in the urban ECE centres, as shown the plate below:

Plate 1: Overcrowding in an urban ECE class



Source: Field Data.

The plate above shows an over enrolled class in the township ECE centre. One of the teachers explained that the school administrators kept enrolling children due to the free education policy. Consequently, most ECE classes are overcrowded making it difficult for teachers to manage class activities. One teacher complained:

“It is not easy to attend to every child and some children end up just playing instead of concentrating on learning. Overcrowding also results in shortages of furniture, teaching and learning materials such as crayons, colour pencils, and play objects like puppets and other toys which are in short supply at school.”

When asked why the enrolment was overwhelming, the teacher clarified that it was due to the “Free Education Policy”, whereby parents were not required to pay school fees and also children were not required to be in uniforms. Teachers also mentioned that inappropriate school infrastructure affected their work including inadequate facilities such as wash rooms which were located far from the ECE centres. The ECE teacher at a peri-urban ECE centre said:

“Time is consumed as children are taken to toilets which are very far from the class. Some children mess themselves up on the way to toilets.”

Another teacher added:

“Classrooms have not been designed for nursery children but for primary kids; hence, pre-school children find difficulties in many ways, such as reaching classroom door handles which are high placed, the chalk board which is above their heights, windows are placed high such that children cannot see what is happening outside, some parts of the school have no ramps but high stair cases.

Plate 2: Inappropriate infrastructure at an ECE Centre



Source: Field Data

The plate above shows an ECE teacher lifting a child to write on the chalk board, an indication that there is no modification to infrastructure in the existing primary schools where annexing of ECE centres is being done. Such classrooms were designed for children above the age of 7 who could easily reach the high placed chalkboard. The photograph was taken during lesson/teaching observation session.

Parent Perspectives on the ECE provision in public Schools

Parents were happy and appreciated the services given to their children in ECE Centres in government primary schools. Government ECE centres follow the Free Education Policy, and so many parents were able to send their children to pre-schools. Education in pre-schools enabled children to socialize with their peers and teachers unlike other children who did not pass through the centres.

ECE enabled parents to do farm work, gardening, selling merchandise at roadside and did house work freely. One parent said:

“I can do work at home such as washing clothes, sweeping and general cleaning of the home without being followed by my child. Children reduce our performance at homes such that we do not even prepare food for our husbands on time.”

Another parent added:

“Sometimes children play a lot at home and in some instances even get injured within or outside home because there is no close monitoring of their play as it is done at school.”

Children had a strong and firm foundation in education. They said children who passed through ECE centres would reduce dropout rates, repetition rates and increased progression rates in primary and secondary schools.

A parent with a child at a remote ECE said:

Our children appear clean every school day because we bath them as they go to school, unlike children who are just kept home. This can improve their hygiene since we even brush their teeth, cut long finger nails and regularly wash their clothes.

The trend of older children remaining taking care of the young ones at home had been done away with because of the introduction of pre-school in government schools. This reduced absenteeism and increased education for older children, especially the girl child.

Most parents interviewed acknowledged that ECE was beneficial to their children and communities. They wished the government could introduce this kind of service in all primary schools in Zambia. One parent said:

This country can develop if all the children began schooling from pre-school because they can know how to read and write early in life; this could in turn help to improve on performance in examinations in primary, secondary and even colleges or universities.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Discussions of findings are presented according to the research questions that guided the study.

Benefits of Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education gives several gains to children, communities and the nation. Research findings indicate that ECE gives an advantage to children’s achievement in their future prospects such as improving language and upgrading social skills, hence contributing positively to the development of the nation.

From the research findings, it can be deduced that preschool, kindergarten or early childhood education experience help promote school performance even if the children are from the low socio-economic stratum. This is supposed to be encouraged and provided to all citizens (Klaus and Gray, 1972; Matafwali, 2022; MoE, 2013) as benefits of early childhood education indicated that children who attended early childhood education were ready for reading, language and personality characteristics. This is also collaborated by Baruth and Duff (1980) and Matafwali and Mofu (2022) who posit that recipients of early education indicated greater interest for the alphabet, vocabulary, number work and were ready to interact with books. Children who undergo pre-school score higher in reading skills and learn faster when they enroll in grade 1.

Additionally, children get organized at a tender age; parents and teachers have less difficulties dealing with such children with regard to right time for meals, toilet issues and other activities that go with desirable

child growth. It becomes easy to teach such children when they enter grade 1 as the culture of school would have been embedded in them at pre-school. This assertion has also been observed by Bowman (2001), who contends that,

“While no single curriculum or pedagogical approach can be identified as best, children who attend well-planned, high-quality ECE programs in which the curriculum aims are specified and integrated across domains tend to learn more and are better prepared to master the complex demands of formal schooling.”

ECE exposes children to the school environment at an early age, where they develop social, physical, mental, aesthetic and emotional capacities. Children also develop spoken and written language early and hence can breakthrough in reading at primary school easily

The benefit of exposing children to school environment need to be emphasized. Familiarity with school at an early age gives confidence in learners as they socialize freely with fellow children and teachers. Such foundations can be laid through early childhood programs which serve as a supplement to children’s home environments. Such programs create an awareness about school institutions and procedures which have a positive impact on formal schooling later on.

Attending ECE also reduces dropout rates which have been rampant in both primary and secondary schools. Children who undergo ECE remain in school and learn confidently; such children do not leave school at all, unless in rare cases.

Parent Involvement in ECE provision

There is a notable consensus across education policy statements and practice guidelines in many countries that parents are children’s first and most enduring educators (OECD, 2012). Parents play a critical role in supporting growth and development of their children. When parents are involved in their child’s early education and form strong partnerships with their teachers and child-care providers, it makes a significant positive impact on the child’s growth and development.

In early childhood programs, parents are encouraged to be involved in all aspects of the program, such as planning, implementation, and evaluation. Parent involvement can be a major component of school improvement and planning (Capper, 1993). Parent involvement activities include, attending meetings, classroom participation, training sessions, parent-teacher conferences, weekly communication with other families and informal gatherings (Mwanamwambwa, Kalimaposo, Mubita, Sikayomya, Muyangana & Haambokoma 2021; Kalimaposo, 2022). Parents are encouraged to share their ideas, interests and concerns to support their child’s development and to enhance early childhood services.

To promote and maintain meaningful parental involvement experiences, some materials should be written in the primary languages of the families, and translators, where ever possible, are provided for family members who speak languages other than English. The study findings show that illiteracy was at a higher magnitude especially in rural and remote areas (Mwanamwambwa et al., 2021). In one of the focused group discussions, one parent said;

“I do not get involved in the education of my children because of not knowing what children learn at school”

Most importantly, parent involvement in the form of ‘at-home good parenting’ has a significant positive effect on children’s achievement and adjustment. Furthermore, in the primary school age range the impact caused by different levels of parent involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. Therefore, when parents are involved, schools get a lot of support from families

and teacher morale is also seen to improve. Even schools where children fail, learners improve dramatically when parents are enabled to become effective partners in their child's education (Henderson and Berla, 1994). Therefore, ECE is not just about working with children, it is also about working with and supporting families, and ultimately about how societies function.

Infrastructure for ECE provision

In addition to offering access to the Montessori materials appropriate to the age of the children, infrastructure of every kind is supposed to be suitable to the Kids at pre-school. The majority of participants indicated that there was need by government to provide appropriate infrastructure such as classrooms and toilets at every ECE Centre suitable to the age of ECE children. They said most of the existing primary schools had old infrastructure in a state of disrepair; with structures characterized by broken glass panes, cracked walls, with little light inside, high stair cases without ramps, making preschoolers crawl to reach classrooms every school day. Educating our Future (MOE, 1996:69) clearly states that provision of desirable education involves prescribing specifications for furniture, equipment, aids and infrastructure. If not quickly checked, the undesirable infrastructure may hinder access and full participation by children below the age of seven in the already existing government primary schools.

The type of Teaching and Learning Materials for Pre-schoolers

Pre-school children have specific learning and teaching materials. According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India (Curriculum Framework, 2012: 14-15), an effective Early Childhood Education programme should exhibit some essential play and learning materials that include adequate supply of developmentally appropriate materials for play, materials and equipment which are safe, clean and in good condition, sufficient quantity of materials to enable learners work in small groups and should be easily accessible to the child, materials which promote gross and fine motor development and help the child to discover and explore including constructing and reconstructing. It should promote sensory exploration and social interaction along with creative expressions through art, painting, etc.

Both teachers and parents indicated that they were not sure of specific learning and teaching materials, let alone materials of play in the pre-schools. The study observed that there were no outdoor play equipment in all the schools under study. One of the head teachers said:

“You are mentioning play-park! play-park! what things should be in a play-park?”

This was clear indication that some school managers have insufficient knowledge about the requirements of an early Childhood Education Centre. It is worth noting that play is more important than academic endeavours at pre-school; no wonder the 2013 Zambia Curriculum Framework for ECE indicates that play should have 60% and academic 40% at pre-school (Curriculum Framework, 2013)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings of the study, it is clear that there are several factors affecting the provision of Early Childhood Education in government primary schools in Kabompo District. While the importance of introducing ECE in the mainstream school system cannot be overemphasized, it is clear from literature and the findings that the programme may not produce expected results if the major obstacles are not corrected.

Conclusions

This study has revealed that there are some gaps between policy on ECE provision and implementation, resulting in many deficits in how ECE is being provided. In fact, currently, the provision of ECE is at the

discretion of the DEBS or head teachers of some schools; the five schools with ECE centres operating in Kabompo were chosen by the DEBS. Other schools still wait for instructions to commence ECE provision, yet the government pronounced that ECE provision was compulsory and be provided in all primary schools from January 2013. Up until at the time of this study not much has been accomplished.

Results of the study show that teachers and head teachers were not certain of their role or practice in the provision ECE. This was evidenced by the absence of a standard curriculum resulting in teaching without class time-tables. There were no teachers' guides and pupils' books in ECE centres at the beginning of the programme implementation. Some head teachers were not aware of the specific teaching and learning materials for pre-school children. No wonder some ECE centres did not have specific indoor and outdoor play objects, play parks or appropriate play grounds.

Some school managers were not modifying infrastructure to suit Early Childhood Education requirements; schools have high stair cases without ramps, some classrooms used as ECE centres have little light, floors have potholes and even the school grounds have objects that could injure children as they play around.

The major factors affecting the provision of ECE in the mainstream school education system are lack of finances, irregular attendance due to long distances between villages/homes and school in rural and remote schools, inadequate or inappropriate infrastructure to favour pre-schoolers, lack of ECE-specific teaching/learning materials, lack of both indoor and outdoor play equipment, over enrolment due to free education policy, among others. However, it is maintained by the government that ECE continues being provided regardless of such challenges.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Ministry of Education should employ Education Standards Officers (ESOs) specifically for ECE in all the districts for effective monitoring of the programme
2. Ministry of Education should assist schools in the construction of appropriate infrastructure for the ECE sector
3. ECE class-sizes and child-teacher ratios must be according to appropriate standards for quality education provision so as to produce desirable results
4. There is need for ECE centres to work in harmony with parents and other stakeholders in order to accommodate the needs of the school and the needs of the parents and community at large.

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