

Rethinking Early Childhood Education in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe: Historical, Policy, and Socioeconomic Dimensions and Contribution to Sustainable Development

Francis Muchenje, Joyce Tafirenyika and Morine Matongo

University of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm embedded in interpretivism to explore the historical context, current state, and future prospects of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programmes in Zimbabwe, particularly their alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through an extensive literature review, the research traces the development of ECE from the pre-colonial period to the present, providing a comprehensive historical analysis that examines shifts in pedagogical settings, policy changes, and socio-economic factors shaping the ECE landscape. The findings reveal significant transformations influenced by colonial legacies, post-independence reforms, and global educational trends. This article underscores the pivotal role of ECE in fostering lifelong learning and its impact on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development while discussing implications for achieving SDGs in Zimbabwe. The conclusion emphasises the necessity of a robust ECE system to promote equitable and inclusive education, reduce poverty, and foster sustainable economic growth. It advocates for policy recommendations aimed at strengthening ECE provision, enhancing teacher training, and increasing investment in early education as a strategic approach to sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Zimbabwe has been profoundly shaped by the country's complex history of colonisation, independence, and ongoing efforts towards sustainable development. As a former British colony, Zimbabwe's educational system reflects colonial legacies that prioritised the needs of the colonisers over those of the local population, resulting in systemic inequalities that adversely affect socio-economically disadvantaged learners and their educational outcomes.

In the post-independence era, successive governments have implemented reforms aimed at transforming the education system to better serve the diverse needs of Zimbabwean citizens. However, the effectiveness of these reforms in addressing historical inequities and aligning ECE with the broader sustainable development agenda remains a critical area of inquiry.

This article, titled "Rethinking Early Childhood Education in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe: Historical, Policy, and Socioeconomic Dimensions and Contribution to Sustainable Development," explores the multifaceted challenges and opportunities that have defined the ECE landscape in Zimbabwe. It examines the enduring legacies of the colonial era and their influence on the provision, access, and quality of ECE services. The article also critically assesses post-independence educational reforms and their impact on ECE, evaluating their success in promoting equity, inclusivity, and alignment with the SDGs.

A key focus of this work is the examination of pedagogical shifts and policy changes that have shaped the ECE landscape over time. By tracing the evolution of teaching approaches, curricula, and regulatory frameworks, the article illuminates the dynamics that have driven both progress and persistent challenges in the ECE sector. Furthermore, it investigates the socio-economic factors that have influenced the provision of ECE services in Zimbabwe, exploring how economic conditions, social disparities, and cultural dynamics have impacted access to and the quality of early childhood education, particularly for marginalised communities.

At the heart of this article is the recognition of the pivotal role that ECE can play in promoting sustainable development goals in Zimbabwe. The work examines how ECE can be strategically leveraged to address critical development challenges, such as poverty alleviation, health and nutrition, gender equality, and environmental stewardship. By positioning ECE as a key driver of sustainable development, the article offers a fresh perspective on the transformative potential of this vital educational sector.

Ultimately, this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical, policy, and socioeconomic dimensions that have shaped the ECE landscape in post-colonial Zimbabwe. By analysing these complex dynamics, the article seeks to inform and inspire stakeholders, policymakers, and practitioners to rethink and reimagine early childhood education as a powerful catalyst for inclusive and sustainable development.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research paradigm embedded in interpretivism, which posits that reality is complex and multi-layered, best understood through the interactions of people, systems, and processes in their context (Crotty, 1998; Cohen et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2015). Literature searches focused on education, early childhood education, early childhood development, history, development studies, and SDGs publications related to Zimbabwe. Only studies that emerged from searches on pedagogical shifts, policy changes, and socio-economic factors were included after screening for relevance to ECE.

Efforts towards Equity and Access to Education after Independence

The attainment of independence in Zimbabwe in 1980 marked a transformative era in the nation's educational landscape. In the wake of independence, the government recognised the urgent need to rectify the historical inequities entrenched in the colonial education system, which had systematically disadvantaged the black majority by denying them access to quality education. As a response, the post-independence government prioritised educational equity as a fundamental aspect of its national development strategy, specifically focusing on enhancing access to education for previously marginalised groups, particularly in pre-primary education.

Historically, the education system in Zimbabwe had been characterised by stark inequalities, with resources disproportionately allocated to benefit the white minority. The colonial government established a dual education system that provided high-quality education to white children while relegating black children to poorly funded and inferior schooling options. This systemic discrimination not only restricted educational opportunities for the black majority but also perpetuated socio-economic disparities that continued to affect the nation long after independence (Chung, 1995). The legacy of this inequitable system necessitated a comprehensive overhaul to ensure that all citizens could access quality education, deemed essential for fostering national unity and development.

In response to these challenges, the Zimbabwean government launched several initiatives aimed at dismantling the barriers to education established during the colonial era. One of the most significant measures was the introduction of mass free education, which sought to eradicate educational inequalities and promote universal access (Chung, 1995). This initiative placed particular emphasis on expanding access to pre-primary education, recognising its critical role in laying the foundation for lifelong learning and development. The government's commitment to education was further underscored by consistent budgetary allocations prioritising this sector, even amidst economic challenges in the years following independence (UNICEF, 1996).

A cornerstone of these efforts was the expansion of educational infrastructure. The government, in collaboration with local communities, undertook the construction of new schools, particularly in rural areas that had been historically underserved. By 1995, the number of primary schools had increased significantly, with enrolments rising from approximately 1.2 million in 1980 to over 2.4 million by 1995 (UNICEF, 1996). This dramatic increase in access illustrated the government's resolve to provide equitable educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their socio-economic background.

However, despite these commendable efforts, the journey towards achieving true equity in education has been

fraught with challenges. The introduction of school fees in urban primary schools in 1992 marked a significant setback, creating financial barriers that disproportionately affected low-income families (Chisvo, 1993). Although safety nets were established through the Social Development Fund, their effectiveness in alleviating the impact of these fees has been questioned, with many families still struggling to afford education for their children (Chisvo, 1996). This shift towards a cost-sharing model raised concerns about the sustainability of the government's commitment to universal access, risking the reintroduction of the very inequalities that independence sought to eliminate.

Moreover, while enrolment figures indicated progress, they often obscured deeper issues related to educational quality and retention. High dropout rates, particularly among girls, highlighted ongoing gender disparities within the education system. Despite improvements in overall enrolment figures, girls continued to face significant barriers that hindered their educational attainment, including socio-cultural factors and economic pressures (UNICEF, 1996). The persistence of these challenges underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of equity that transcends mere access to education.

In brief, the post-independence efforts to enhance equity and access to education in Zimbabwe reflect a complex interplay of policy initiatives and persistent challenges. Although significant strides have been made in expanding educational opportunities for the previously marginalised black majority, ongoing issues related to affordability, quality, and gender disparities remain critical areas for further intervention. Achieving true educational equity in Zimbabwe necessitates not only sustained government investment but also a holistic approach that addresses the multifaceted barriers facing vulnerable populations.

Role of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Lifelong Learning and Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Zimbabwe

Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Early Childhood Development (ECD) have emerged as critical components in the global agenda for sustainable development, particularly in the context of Zimbabwe. The significance of ECE is underscored by its alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which advocate for inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. In Zimbabwe, the government has recognised the importance of ECE in fostering holistic development among children, thereby contributing to national development and the achievement of the SDGs.

Importance of ECE in Holistic Development

ECE is pivotal in laying the groundwork for children's holistic development, encompassing cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth. Research indicates that early learning programmes significantly influence children's future educational outcomes and socio-economic status. The skills and values acquired during early childhood have lasting effects that extend into adulthood, shaping individuals' abilities to contribute positively to society and the economy (UNICEF, 2019). For instance, children who participate in quality ECE programmes are more likely to perform better academically, exhibit improved social skills, and demonstrate greater resilience in the face of challenges (Heckman, 2011).

Moreover, ECE fosters essential life skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication. These competencies are increasingly recognised as vital for navigating the complexities of modern life and the workforce. By equipping children with these skills, ECE not only enhances individual potential but also contributes to the development of a skilled workforce that can drive economic growth and innovation in Zimbabwe (World Bank, 2018).

ECE and Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs emphasise the necessity of quality early childhood development and pre-primary education for all children, recognising that early education is foundational to achieving broader developmental goals. Specifically, Goal 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. In Zimbabwe, the government has made strides towards this goal by implementing policies that prioritise ECE, including the integration of ECD into the national education framework (Ministry

of Primary and Secondary Education, 2015).

Furthermore, ECE plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality and reducing inequalities, as highlighted in SDG 5. By providing equal access to quality early education for both boys and girls, ECE programmes help to dismantle traditional gender roles and empower young girls, thereby fostering a more equitable society (UNESCO, 2019). This empowerment is essential for breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring that all children have the opportunity to realise their full potential.

ECE as a Transformative Tool for Sustainable Practices

Education, particularly early education, is viewed as a transformative tool that shapes how individuals interact with their environment and the systems within it. ECE promotes a responsible approach to resource management, instilling values of sustainability and environmental stewardship in young learners. By integrating environmental education into ECE curricula, children are taught the importance of conserving natural resources and minimising the negative impacts of human activities on the environment (UNICEF, 2019). This early exposure to sustainability concepts is crucial for fostering a generation that is conscious of its ecological footprint and committed to sustainable practices.

In Zimbabwe, initiatives aimed at incorporating environmental education into ECE programmes have shown promise in cultivating a culture of sustainability among young learners. For example, community-based ECE programmes that engage children in local environmental projects not only enhance their learning experiences but also contribute to the broader goals of sustainable development (World Bank, 2018).

In brief, Early Childhood Education plays a vital role in promoting lifelong learning and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Zimbabwe. By laying a strong foundation for holistic development, equipping children with essential skills, and fostering a commitment to sustainability, ECE contributes significantly to national development. However, to fully realise the potential of ECE in Zimbabwe, continued investment in quality early education programmes, teacher training, and community engagement is essential. This commitment will ensure that all children, regardless of their background, have access to the transformative benefits of early education, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and sustainable future.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in postcolonial theory, which examines the enduring effects of European colonialism. In the context of education in Zimbabwe, colonial influences manifested through racial discrimination and segregation. European children received a superior education, while African children faced systemic discrimination, particularly in pre-primary education. Education served as an ideological state apparatus, reinforcing settler dominance during the colonial era.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism further elucidates the relationship between colonising nations and the colonised. Said posits that the West constructed the concept of the Orient as a primitive 'other', which influenced colonial policies, including those related to education. These policies were designed to uphold the interests of white colonisers, resulting in discriminatory practices that hindered African access to education in pre-independent Zimbabwe.

Precolonial Context of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Zimbabwe

The educational system in Zimbabwe, particularly concerning Early Childhood Development (ECD), is deeply rooted in a historical context characterised by racial discrimination and segregation. This legacy has significantly influenced the structure and accessibility of education for different racial groups, particularly during the colonial era. The following key observations highlight the pre-colonial context of ECE in Zimbabwe:

Colonial Education and Racial Discrimination

The colonial education system in Zimbabwe was explicitly designed to uphold white supremacy, creating a

stark division between the educational experiences of white and African children. This system was underpinned by policies that favoured the white minority, resulting in a dual education system where African children were subjected to underfunded and inferior educational opportunities. The lack of resources allocated to African schools not only limited educational attainment but also perpetuated a cycle of social reproduction, where the disadvantaged status of black individuals was maintained across generations (Chung, 1995). This systemic inequality ensured that African children were prepared for low-skilled, low-paying jobs, reinforcing the socio-economic hierarchies established by colonial rule.

Neglect of Pre-Primary Education for African Children

During the colonial era, pre-primary education for African children received minimal attention and funding. While European education was well-resourced and designed to prepare white children for privileged roles in society, African children were largely excluded from these opportunities. The lack of investment in early childhood education for black children meant that they entered primary education without the foundational skills necessary for academic success. This neglect not only hindered their educational progress but also contributed to long-term socio-economic disadvantages, as early childhood experiences are critical for cognitive and social development (UNICEF, 2019).

Differential Legislation in ECE

The provision of ECE in Zimbabwe was governed by legislation that explicitly favoured white children, further entrenching educational advantages for the white minority. Laws and policies were crafted to ensure that resources, facilities, and trained educators were predominantly allocated to schools serving white populations. This legislative framework not only perpetuated racial disparities but also institutionalised the notion that African children were less deserving of quality education. The implications of such differential legislation have had lasting effects on the educational landscape in Zimbabwe, contributing to ongoing inequalities in access to quality early childhood education (Chisvo, 1996).

Education as an Ideological State Apparatus

Education during the colonial period was exploited by colonisers as an ideological state apparatus, serving to promote values that upheld capitalism and the interests of the ruling class. The curriculum was designed to reinforce social inequality, teaching African children to accept their subordinate status within the socio-economic hierarchy. This educational approach not only limited the aspirations of African children but also relegated them to lower occupational roles, effectively stifling any potential for upward mobility. The ideological underpinnings of this education system were aimed at maintaining control over the black population, ensuring that they remained compliant and economically dependent on the colonial regime (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011).

The precolonial context of ECE in Zimbabwe reveals a complex interplay of racial discrimination, neglect, and ideological manipulation within the educational system. The legacy of colonial education has had profound implications for the development of ECD in Zimbabwe, contributing to persistent inequalities that continue to affect access to quality education for African children. Understanding this historical context is essential for addressing the challenges faced by the current educational system and for developing policies that promote equity and inclusivity in early childhood education.

Post-Independence Context of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Zimbabwe

Following Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, the government made significant strides towards addressing the educational imbalances that had been entrenched during the colonial era. This commitment to reforming the educational landscape, particularly in Early Childhood Education (ECE), was marked by several key developments aimed at promoting inclusivity and improving access to quality education for all children, regardless of their racial background.

Commitment to Education for All

One of the primary objectives of the post-independence government was to ensure that education was

accessible to all racial groups, thereby eliminating the racial segregation and discrimination that characterised the colonial education system. The government pledged to provide universal education, which was seen as a fundamental right and a crucial step towards national development. This commitment was reflected in various policies aimed at increasing enrolment rates and improving educational infrastructure across the country (Gordon, 1994). The emphasis on Education for All (EFA) aligned with global initiatives, such as the Jomtien Declaration of 1990, which sought to promote inclusive education worldwide (UNESCO, 2015).

Evolution of Early Childhood Education

The landscape of Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Zimbabwe has undergone significant transformations over the past several decades, reflecting broader educational reforms and socio-political changes. This literature review aims to trace the historical development of ECD in Zimbabwe, from its inception to the present day, highlighting key milestones, policies, and challenges that have shaped its trajectory.

Historically, ECD in Zimbabwe can be traced back to traditional practices, where communities engaged in informal caregiving and early learning activities. However, it was not until the late 20th century that ECD began to be recognised as a formal aspect of the education system. The establishment of the Nziramasanga Commission in 1999 marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of ECD in Zimbabwe. The Commission's report advocated for universal early childhood education, emphasising the integration of ECD classes into primary schools (Nziramasanga Commission, 1999). This recommendation was instrumental in formalising ECD within the national education system, recognising the critical role of early learning in child development.

Following the recommendations of the Nziramasanga Commission, significant policy developments occurred. The adoption of a national ECD syllabus in 2011 further solidified the government's commitment to structured and quality early childhood education (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2011). This syllabus aimed to create a cohesive framework that aligned ECD programmes with developmental standards, promoting holistic child development and ensuring accessibility for all children.

In subsequent years, various initiatives were launched to enhance the quality of ECD services. The Zimbabwe National Early Childhood Development Policy, established in 2016, sought to create an integrated and inclusive ECD framework that addressed the diverse needs of children (Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, 2016). This policy underscored the importance of community involvement and parental engagement in ECD initiatives, recognising that effective early childhood education requires support from families and local communities.

Despite these advancements, the ECD sector in Zimbabwe faces several challenges. Issues such as inadequate funding, a shortage of trained educators, and disparities in access to quality ECD programmes persist (UNICEF, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, highlighting vulnerabilities in the education system and underscoring the need for resilient and adaptive ECD strategies.

Recent literature calls for a comprehensive approach to ECD that not only focuses on educational outcomes but also addresses health, nutrition, and psychosocial support for young children (World Bank, 2021). Moreover, there is a growing recognition of the need to incorporate indigenous knowledge and practices into ECD programmes to ensure cultural relevance and effectiveness (Chikoko & Kurebwa, 2021).

In brief, the history of ECD in Zimbabwe reflects a dynamic interplay of traditional practices and formal educational reforms. From the foundational work of the Nziramasanga Commission to recent policy developments, the evolution of ECD has been marked by significant achievements and ongoing challenges. As Zimbabwe continues to strive towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on quality education, there is a pressing need for sustained investment and innovative approaches to enhance ECD provision. Future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of current policies and exploring strategies to overcome existing barriers, ensuring that every child in Zimbabwe has access to quality early childhood education.

Recommendations of the Presidential Nziramasanga Commission on Education

The Nziramasanga Commission, established in 1999 under the auspices of the Zimbabwean government, played a pivotal role in shaping the future of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Zimbabwe. Chaired by Professor Nziramasanga, the Commission was tasked with evaluating the education system and providing recommendations for improvement. The Commission's report advocated for universal early childhood education, emphasising the need for the integration of Early Childhood Development (ECD) classes into primary schools. This recommendation was a significant step towards formalising ECE within the national education system, recognising the critical importance of early learning in a child's development.

In 2011, the adoption of a national ECD syllabus further solidified the government's commitment to providing structured and quality early childhood education (Nziramasanga Commission, 1999). This syllabus was designed to ensure that ECD programmes were not only accessible but also aligned with developmental standards that promote holistic child development. The integration of ECD into primary education not only facilitated smoother transitions for children entering formal schooling but also aimed to enhance the overall quality of education in Zimbabwe.

The Commission's recommendations highlighted several key areas for improvement, including the need for increased investment in early childhood education, the training and professional development of ECD educators, and the establishment of monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the effectiveness of ECD programmes. By addressing these areas, the Commission aimed to create a robust ECE system that would contribute to the broader goals of educational equity and quality in Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, the Nziramasanga Commission underscored the importance of community involvement and parental engagement in ECE initiatives. It recognised that for ECE to be effective, it must be supported by families and communities, fostering an environment conducive to learning and development. The Commission's comprehensive approach aimed to ensure that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, had access to quality early childhood education, thereby laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and development.

Ultimately, the recommendations of the Nziramasanga Commission represent a significant milestone in the evolution of early childhood education in Zimbabwe. By advocating for universal access, integration into primary education, and a focus on quality and equity, the Commission has set the stage for a more inclusive and effective education system that can meet the needs of all children in Zimbabwe.

Regulation of ECD Programs

To ensure the quality and sustainability of ECD programmes, the government introduced Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005, which established comprehensive regulations for ECD centres. This legislation focused on critical areas such as the registration of centres, the conditions of facilities, and the qualifications of teachers. By aligning ECD programmes with international standards, the government aimed to enhance the quality of early childhood education and support sustainable development efforts (Ministry of Education, 2005). The regulatory framework was designed to create a conducive learning environment for young children, thereby promoting their holistic development and preparing them for future educational challenges.

The post-independence context of ECE in Zimbabwe reflects a significant transformation aimed at rectifying the injustices of the colonial education system. Through a commitment to Education for All, the evolution of ECE management, the recommendations of the Nziramasanga Commission, and the establishment of regulatory frameworks, the Zimbabwean government has made substantial progress in promoting inclusive and quality early childhood education. However, ongoing challenges remain, necessitating continued efforts to ensure that all children have access to the educational opportunities they deserve.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To further align ECD with the SDGs, it is crucial to:

1. Strengthen ECE provision on an equitable basis, considering the differentiated educational opportunities and outcomes influenced by learners' geopolitical and socio-economic contexts.
2. Enhance teacher training and capacity-building, ensuring educators are equipped with the knowledge and competencies necessary to view education as a pivotal developmental goal and a tool for combating poverty and inequalities.
3. Increase government investment in early years of education as a strategy for fostering sustainable development goals in Zimbabwe

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