Management and Provision of Early Childhood Education in Public and Private Schools in Chegutu District of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Universal primary education was one of the eight millennium development goals and was based on the notion that foundation education forms the basis for sustainable education.2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focuses on seventeen goals. Goal number four states that: governments must ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. One of the targets of this goal is to ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood education. The Zimbabwe government, enacted laws and policies to support the establishment of early childhood education. The Secretary's Circular No. 14 of 2004 and Statutory Instrument 105 of 2005 regularised the provision of early childhood education in both public and private schools. The demand for education and the shortage of schools brought a new dimension in the provision of education in Zimbabwe. The demand contributed to a rise in the establishment of private schools. Curriculum reform has incorporated the use of modern technology at all levels of the school system. The paper aimed at assessing the management and provision of early childhood education in public and private schools. It used the qualitative research approach. Data was generated from school heads, deputy heads, teachers-in-charge, teachers and parents at six purposively selected primary schools in Chegutu District of Zimbabwe. Data was collected through focus group discussions, interviews, open-ended questionnaires, observations and document analysis. The sample comprised forty-five participants. The paper was guided by the assumption that management and provision of early childhood education has faced challenges that have compromised quality in both public and private centres. The paper came up with several findings which included different perceptions of EC education by stakeholders, lack of understanding of policy requirements, compromised quality of education and notable gaps in professional qualifications among ECD teachers. It recommends capacity building for all stakeholders, a collaborative approach by ministries to intensify the supervision and monitoring of the centres, intensifying foundation teacher education. It also recommends the establishment of a regulatory framework for the concept of a '*tots class'.* Lastly, the provision of early childhood education should be the responsibility of the state, to ensure that no child is disadvantaged by the socio-economic status of parents.

Key words: Management, Curriculum, Early Childhood Education, Public school, Private school, ECD centre, Policy

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Provision of early childhood education is on the agenda of international development agencies, such as UNESCO and UNICEF. The international development agencies have demonstrated concern for early childhood education through advocacy for increase in expenditure and investment in foundation education. They emphasise the need for a strong foundation in the development of young children through working with governments to promote quality education, teacher education and funding of early childhood programmes (UNICEF, 2019). Millenium Development goal number two, focused on the need to achieve universal primary education, through increasing access, improving outcomes and promoting quality education. While the goal did not explicitly refer to early childhood education, the focus on universal primary education is quite encompassing. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development goal number four explicitly refers to early childhood education. It states that governments must ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all and one of its targets is to ensure all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary

education (United Nations, 2015). The goal and its targets raises key issues of inclusivity, gender equality and quality education at foundation stages.

Early childhood development is a right recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the child. The Conventions and ratifications thereof have demonstrated a global concern on issues of children's rights and development. The Dakar Conference of 2000 supported the goal for Education for All with emphasis on early childhood education. The focus of different international agencies such as World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO was on the requirement to promote the total development of children from an early age. At the Jomtien Conference of 1990 in Thailand, several countries signed the protocol of education for all (Evans, 2002). Education for all in this respect included providing education for children at early childhood development level as well. The Dakar Conference was therefore a follow-up to the Jomtien Conference and focused on the extent to which countries had progressed in establishing early childhood development programmes to facilitate children's transition into formal primary school.

In South Africa, there have been several developments in education and ECD since 1994. South Africa has a legal framework for protecting children's rights and interests but faces challenges in the implementation of the policies (Atmore, 2012). The legal framework included the signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1995; the establishment of a Directorate for Early Childhood Development within the national Education Department; the introduction of Grade R for children aged 5 years turning 6 years; and the provision of ECD subsidies (Atmore, 2012).

Despite all these efforts children in most provinces in South Africa lack access to ECD programmes, with enrolments in some provinces below the national average. This may be due to several factors, which include limited infrastructure, lack of funding of ECD programmes, effects of poverty, poorly trained caregivers; lack of equipment; lack of infrastructure and lack of relevant teaching and learning materials which include modern technology (Mahadew, 2024).

ECD programmes in Zimbabwe started in 1982. They were under the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs and were transferred to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in 1998. Under the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs caregivers were volunteers and implementation of ECD programmes was irregular, varied in quality, lacked relevant policy, and there was very little evidence of government involvement in providing necessary infrastructure (Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training Report, 1999).

The 1996 Education Act as Revised specifies the regulations and curriculum implementation requirements for nursery schools in Zimbabwe. Section 27 of the Act stipulates that the minister had a right to require nursery schools to do the following: to register; provide for the fixing of curricula and the standards of tuition, premises; prohibit the teaching in nursery schools of any subject commonly taught in a school; and provide for inspection of nursery schools (Government of Zimbabwe, 1996). The Act aimed at regularising the operations of nursery schools. The Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013 and the Education Act of 2006 emphasize the children's fundamental right to education in Zimbabwe and that basic education must be state funded.

Since then, there have been major developments in the implementation of ECD programmes in Zimbabwe. These include policy guidelines on the implementation of ECD programmes as contained in The Secretary's Circular Number 14 of 2004 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2004), Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2005) and Director's Circular No. 48 of 2007 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2007). The policy documents covered a variety of areas. These included regulations on how ECD centres should operate, the registration process, directives to establish ECD-A and ECD-B in all primary schools in Zimbabwe, the ages of children who should attend ECD, sessions and duration, enrolment requirements, teacher-pupil ratio, facilities and equipment requirements, management and administration of the centres.

With assistance from UNICEF the then Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture started in-service training of school heads, deputy heads and teachers-in-charge on ECD supervision. As a result of this initiative, 200 paraprofessionals were trained in 2005 and by 2016, 9954 paraprofessionals had been trained (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2016). Apart from the training of paraprofessionals, teachers colleges embarked on an extended programme of ECD teacher education.

Statement of the problem

The demand for education at primary, secondary and tertiary education levels has witnessed a rise in private schools and colleges in Zimbabwe. Under such rises the issues of quality education may be compromised if there are no clear guidelines on the management, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of education programmes. While early childhood education has not received the attention it deserves since independence in Zimbabwe, there has been a paradigm shift since the recommendations of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training of 1999. Education as a sector has faced many challenges that include shortage of both human and material resources, lack of facilities and equipment. The paper aims to answer the question: How are public and middle private primary schools managing and providing Early Childhood Education in Chegutu District of Zimbabwe?

Purpose of the study

The management of early childhood education has faced several challenges that require assessment. The purpose of the paper is to assess the management and provision of EC education in selected centres in Chegutu District of Zimbabwe.

Research questions

The main research question is broken into sub-questions as follows:

- What roles do stakeholders play in the management and provision of EC education?
- What are the qualifications of teachers at ECD centres?
- What is the state of facilities and equipment at ECD centres?
- How have the centres implemented the ECD curriculum?

Assumption of the study

The study is guided by the following assumption:

- The management and the provision of EC education has faced challenges that have compromised the quality of education.

Significance of the study

The study is important to parents, teachers, school heads, policy makers and education planners. ECD has taken centre stage in education today, since foundation education forms a basis for future development. Policy makers and planners may revise policies on the management and provision of early childhood education. It also provides the basis on which capacity building programmes can be designed, as it contributes new knowledge and perception on management and provision of early childhood education. It provides a basis for an assessment on one of the targets of sustainable development goal number four.

Delimitations of the study

The paper covers six ECD centres in Chegutu District of Zimbabwe. These were three public centres and three private centres. The centres and participants were purposively selected based on accessibility to the researcher. The paper examines the curriculum, teaching approaches, management of the centres, adherence to regulations, resources to support teaching and learning, and the role of stakeholders.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the study. Limited funding forced the researcher to confine the study to a small area. The use of the qualitative approach affected the generalizability of the findings. Time was also a limiting factor as the study was conducted during the school term and during working hours. The use of the open-ended questionnaire, observations, face-to-face interviews, document analysis and focus group discussions presented a challenge on the management of data.

Conceptual Framework: Management and Provision of EC Education

The ECD programmes cater for children from zero to eight years. They have been developed based on different educational philosophies, which include Dewey's progressivisms, Comenius's philosophy of realism, Rousseau's philosophy of naturalism, Froebel's philosophy of idealism and Pestalozzi's theory of physical education (Watson, 1996). The philosophies form the basis on which educational policies are founded, and several teaching and learning approaches have emerged from them. Dewey's progressivism philosophy advocated for active learning which made use of experiential and problem-solving approaches. The philosophy of progressivism discouraged teacher-centred approaches to learning. The role of the teacher was to facilitate learning through guiding, organising, and evaluating children's activities.

The philosophers placed emphasis on different aspects of education. Rousseau argued that the child is the measure of all things and every aspect of education must revolve around the child, Pestalozzi's ideas on education of young children emphasized the need for young children to get specialised treatment that allowed them to develop at their own pace, while Commenious emphasized the role of home-based teaching, and the use of activity methods for learning (Manjengwa, 2014). These different views about how children learn and develop still influence education programmes in the 21st century.

The Montessori Approach and Early Childhood (EC) education

The Montessori Approach advocates for learning that is child centred. It emphasizes a curriculum that focuses on the child's practical life, sensorial materials, mathematics, language materials, cultural subjects, lessons that promote experimental and discovery learning and homeschooling (Bhat, 2021). The approach emphasizes the physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and social development of the child. The relevance of the Montessori approach is embedded in three main areas, which are the environment, the child and the teacher. Some of the Montessori principles are absorbent mind, sensitive periods, multi-age grouping, practical life materials, sensory materials, mathematics materials, and language materials (Saha, 2023). Montessori believed that young children are receptive to and capable of learning as they absorb knowledge into their psychic lives, as they take information from the environment. The role of the teacher is to create a stimulating environment. Through guidance from the principles, children can learn specific skills, learn from each other, develop physical coordination, experience the natural order of the environment, develop basic concepts as numeration, place value, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division and basic skills of reading a written language (Morrison, 1995).

Different educational ideas have influenced the philosophical, sociological, psychological and historical foundations of curriculum development in Zimbabwe. The competence-based and the heritage-based curricular aim at developing learner competences and life skills, preserving identity and promoting innovation. The educational curriculum at all levels places emphasis on learner-centred teaching and learning.

The Zimbabwean model of ECD

The Zimbabwean model of ECD is reflected in the curriculum and derived from the Education Act 2006 and Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005, among other legal frameworks. The Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 spells out regulations which stipulate the following: early childhood development centres must be inspected by the Secretary, or anyone authorised by the Secretary; the age of attendance, the curriculum and other activities at the ECD centres; facilities to be provided, standards of cleanliness, staffing requirements; ECD centres should be brought under the nearest primary school for management and supervision; ECD centres are to operate on a teacher to pupil ratio of 1:20 and the classes are to be manned by appropriately qualified teachers, though paraprofessionals would continue to be engaged; School Development Committees were expected to play a crucial role in developing and promoting the ECD programme at their schools; Primary school heads, Education Officers and ECD District trainers were to provide essential professional advice; and Play must be central to children's learning (Government of Zimbabwe, 2005).

EC education in Zimbabwe is a two-year programme, enrolling 3–4-year and 4–5-year-olds in ECD-A and ECD-B classes respectively. The two classes have become the foundation component of the primary school

curriculum. The incorporation of ECD classes into the primary school increased the primary school years from seven to nine years in Zimbabwe.

The Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) developed and designed the ECD syllabus in 2012. The syllabus states aims and objectives of learning areas, methodology, role of ECD teachers, methods of teaching and emphasizes a child-centred approach to learning. The major role of the teacher is to provide a stimulating environment. The syllabus further suggests the following methods of teaching and learning: discovery; problem solving; experimentation; discussion; word games; poems and rhymes; story telling; role play and drama; and field trips. The ECD programme must cover five curriculum areas, which are Expressive Arts, Language Arts, Mathematics and Science, Social Sciences and Information and Communication Technology (The Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, 2012). The learning areas have since been expanded to cover Family and Heritage Studies because of the focus on a heritage-based curriculum.

Resources at ECD centres

Facilities required at ECD centres include indoor and outdoor equipment to cater for the holistic development of a child and indoor facilities such as chairs, tables, beds, books, cupboards, televisions, puzzles, video cameras, blocks, toy cars, cooking utensils, carpets and mattresses must be available at the centres (The Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, 2012).The centres must provide for outdoor facilities. Both indoor and outdoor facilities must cater for the children's environmental needs. The emphasis is therefore on the need for every ECD centre to have an environment that encourages movement, a sense of belonging and control, fosters competence, safety, and self-esteem.

ECD centres must conform to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the protection of children from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation and that children should be kept safe and not hurt or neglected. It is the responsibility of educational leaders to inspect indoor and outdoor equipment and manage resources at the ECD centre. The resources to be managed include human, financial and material resources. An educational leader must perform management functions which include planning, supervision, organisational development, personnel development, coordinating, directing and controlling, organising, communication and motivation.

Involvement of parents in ECD programmes

Provision of early childhood education involves the parent ministry, parents, pupils, school heads and teachers. Director's Circular No. 48 of 2007, notes that provision of EC education must involve local communities, education officers who must assist in establishing quality ECD centres and mobilising resources for the feeding programme (Government of Zimbabwe, 2007). The argument for involvement of parents in EC education is two- fold. First, the parent is a natural teacher by virtue of her position and should therefore continue to provide guidance even outside the home. Secondly, the centre forms part of the child's socialisation process, parents must be involved in this socialisation process. If children are given appropriate care during the foundation stage, they make remarkable gains in physical and motor development, linguistic and cognitive development and notable gains in emotional, social and moral capacities and parental involvement is one of the accurate predictors of a child's achievement in school (Sandin, 2023). In early childhood education, parental involvement can include supporting feeding programmes, ensuring that children are properly cared for in terms of their provisions, paying fees and levies on time, interfacing directly with children's learning activities at home and at school, sharing information and participating in school projects. Parents have an obligation to provide a home environment that promotes development through exposing the child to relevant learning experiences, and materials such as pictures, books, good comics, and story books, audio and video programmes (Gupta,2009). Involvement in schoolwork provides an opportunity to the parents to develop themselves on how best they can help children at home.

However, there are notable barriers to parental involvement in early childhood education. In some developing countries the literacy rate is very low. The parent is expected to read stories to their children and assist in educational activities. The education level of the parents may negatively impact on how they can assist with homework and use of different development materials. The reforms and changes in the education curriculum have widened the learning areas even at ECD level. The introduction of new learning areas such as

Information and Communication Technology may be a challenge even to the literate. Economic productivity has resulted in both parents going out for work or going to the market to sale their products as means of supporting the family. The burden may be much higher in single parent families.

Theoretical Framework: Management and Implementation of ECD programmes

Schools and ECD centres are organisations that must have clearly defined goals and aims. ECD centres are formal organisations which prepare young children to become good adult members of society through developing them physically, socially, intellectually and emotionally (Faber, 1998). Implementation of ECD programmes can be guided by different theories of management. The paper focused on the Scientific management theory as it sought to assess the extent to which rules and regulations that govern the operations of ECD centres were implemented.

The Scientific Management Theory

The scientific management theory advocated for the following in organisations: careful specification and measurement of all organisational tasks, standardisation of tasks, reward and punishment for the workers. Max Weber's bureaucratic theory is derived from the Scientific Management theory. This theory advocates for the following elements in organisations: a hierarchical structure; division of labour; control by rules; impersonal relationship; and career orientation. Policy documents were intended to direct official decisions and actions in the management and provision of EC education and ensure uniformity, predictability and stability in ECD centres. The paper was also concerned with structures, educational practices and the management function of supervision in the selected ECD centres.

ECD Programme implementation

Programme implementation in education encompasses interpretation of policy, planning, organising, coordinating and all actives that ensure teaching and learning. It is the direct action that follows a policy directive to achieve set goals and can have both intended and unintended outcomes. UNICEF (2017) provided a framework for articulating the vision, goals and indicators within the context of SDGs and the identification of implementation strategies for ECD. Approaches to educational programme implementation can be structural, procedural, managerial, behavioural or political. The different approaches can be adopted at the same time for effective programme implementation. Structural approaches focus on planning of change and make use of a bureaucratic structure, while procedural and managerial approaches involve designing of a programme that spells out the task, objectives, costs and performance standards and mobilisation of appropriate resources. The behavioural approach is about mechanisms to manage behaviours and different forms of reactions that can emerge when new programmes are introduced. Such reactions include passive acceptance, indifference, passive resistance and active resistance and all these must be managed.

The implementation of ECD curriculum has been observed to have positive effects on children's learning and development globally. Management and provision of early childhood education in the United States of America has contributed to long-term improvements in school success and positive effects on children's learning and development (Bannet, 2008). However, the implementation of ECD education programmes has faced challenges in some developing countries. In South Africa, factors such as, poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, lack of government support in rural areas, poverty in communities, household socio-economic status and ECD practitioners' pedagogical knowledge were some of the noted challenges (Mahadew, 2024).

The evaluation of ECD programmes in Zimbabwe has noted lack of clarity by school heads on their administrative roles, lack of competence in managing the ECD curriculum and lack of resources. In addition, lack of ECD trained teachers, lack of facilities and equipment, weak implementation structures, lack of priority in procurement of ECD materials have all impacted negatively on the provision of early childhood education (Takaendesa, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

The paper employed the qualitative approach, which relies on language and interpretation of meaning, and

makes use of non-quantitative observations which were analysed in a non-statistical way. The data generation process involved interacting with the participants, observing events and giving meanings to actions and practices in the selected schools. The qualitative approach provided unique interactions within a particular situation and the in-depth characteristics of the situation, which contributed to the development of new perspectives on early childhood education. The qualitative approach allowed for several methods of generating data which included observations, interviews, open-ended questionnaires, focus group discussions and document analysis. The paper used the case study design which provided for an intensive analysis of single units and focus groups and the assessment of practice in closer proximity.

Sample

Six ECD centres were purposively selected from schools in Chegutu District of Zimbabwe. The centres were selected based on accessibility. They comprised three centres at private schools and another three from public schools. All the school heads, deputy heads, teachers-in-charge, ECD teachers and two members of the School Development Committees in the selected schools participated. This provided a total of forty-five participants.

Data collection methods

The paper used the open- ended questionnaire, interview, observation, focus group discussion and document analysis to generate data. The open-ended questionnaire, like the interview gave the participants the opportunity to express themselves using their own language. The interviews complimented the open-ended questionnaires as they involved discussing specific topics related to early childhood education in depth and provided opportunities for probing to seek clarification. The third method for data collection used is the observation method. It involved the systematic, detailed observation of behaviour of ECD teachers and learners in class to ascertain the implementation of the ECD curriculum. Observations were also made on the equipment used by the children, the classroom sizes, play centres, the learning and interaction among children, and children's facilities such as toilets and water points. Document analysis involved assessing scheme-plans, registers, children's records and timetables.

Ethical considerations

Research ethics involve fairness, honesty and treating respondents with respect. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants. The participants were advised of their right to privacy or non-participation and were also guaranteed confidentiality and the right to remain anonymous. The researcher acknowledged the ideas of other scholars where they were used.

Data analysis

Data was analysed qualitatively. The analysis was based on the research questions and the themes that emerged from the responses. The paper used open coding for data analysis and discussion. The following conceptual labels emerged and formed the basis of the themes of the data generated:

- Perceptions of stakeholders on management and provision of Early Childhood education
- Quality foundation education and resource provision
- Government circulars and Policy
- Qualifications of teachers at the ECD centres
- ECD curriculum Implementation in private and public centres

Data presentation and major findings

The gender distribution of the participants was as follows: three male school heads, three female school heads, four male deputy heads, two female deputy heads, six female TICs, fifteen female ECD teachers and twelve SDC members who were evenly distributed. There is lack of inclusion of males in early childhood education.

This concurs with observations in public schools in the United States of America and globally. The percentage of female teachers tends to be higher at basic education level. Inclusion can contribute to the enrichment of foundation education provision and diversity of learning activities.

Academic and Professional qualifications

All the six teachers in the private ECD centres had O' level qualifications and paraprofessional qualifications. Paraprofessionals are ECD teachers who do not have teaching qualifications but received capacity building training through the UNICEF supported programmes. All the ECD teachers and TICs in public schools had a minimum of a Diploma in Early Childhood Development, and two of the TICs in public ECD centres had a Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Development. It was observed that there were ECD teachers who did not have the requisite qualifications and that most of the school heads and deputy heads had degrees in education but had not specialised in early childhood education. All the twelve members of the SDC indicated that they had acquired secondary school education. One of the indicators of quality in education is the relevance of teachers qualifications.

Composition of ECD classes

School heads, deputy heads, TICs and ECD teachers were asked to indicate the average teacher pupil ratios in the ECD classes. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the school or centre, A, B, and C were public schools or centres and D, E, F were private schools or centres. Centre A had a teacher pupil ratio of 1:50. At centre B, the teacher pupil ratio 1:58. At centre C the teacher pupil ratio was 1:35. A common observation in all the public centres was that ECD-B classes always had higher number of learners than ECD-A. Private ECD centre D had a teacher pupil ratio of 1:20. ECD centre D is a private centre which is attached to a primary school. Private ECD centre E was also attached to a primary school. The centre had three classes, namely the '*tots class*,' ECD-A, and ECD-B. The teacher pupil ratio was 1:20. The '*tots class'* was a development that was found at only one centre. The '*tots class'* programme was different from the ECD-A and ECD-B curriculum. The TIC at the centre shared the following information about the '*tots class*:

The 'tots class' focuses on ages 0-3 and the programme is generally an unregulated pre-ECD or Creche programme which focuses heavily on care, well-being, and holistic developmental play. We incorporate components of the Cambridge Curriculum Early Years with the ECD objectives of our ECD curriculum. The focus is on the development of the following areas and skills: gross motor skills, fine motor skills, self-help skills, social skills, emotional skills, values, mathematical play, music and movement among other aspects.

The efforts at centre E raise questions about the development of children before they enrol for ECD-A and ECD-B. The question is about the stage at which foundation education can be guided and formalized. The TIC at centre E also shared their weekly activities work plan which was different from ECD-A and ECD-B since it did not focus on curriculum learning areas. At private centre F, the TIC noted that the ECD centre had a teacher pupil ratio of 1:27.

The responses on the composition of the classes from the six centres demonstrate a gap between ECD-A and ECD-B. In most cases enrolment at ECD-A was lower than at ECD-B. It was also noted that enrolment in private centres and teacher pupil ratio were lower than in public centres. According to the Secretary's Circular 14 of 2004 which offers guidelines on the provision of EC education there were to be two classes at ECD, composed of 3–4-year-olds for ECD-A and 4–5-year-olds for ECD-B. The differences in enrolment numbers between the ECD-A and ECD-B classes appear to suggest that most parents and guardians are only sending children for a year at ECD-B before they start grade one. This has resulted in children spending eight years at primary school instead of the regulated nine. The practice can be attributed to several factors which include attitudes of parents and guardians who have not yet appreciated the role of EC education in the development of the child, the socio-economic status of parents, and limited resources. Several teachers attributed this gap to parents' perception of ECD education:

T1: Parents do not understand early childhood education. They think that learners are always playing instead of learning and as such they can just play at home.

T2. The community does not appreciate the role of Early Childhood development. That is why they send children to school for just one year before they enrol for grade one.

T3: The Socio-economic situation forces parents to make hard decisions that may impact negatively on the development of their children. Early childhood education is not free. At this school when children come for ECD for the first they have to pay fees and other levies that cost about $300USD.

There are many variables that come into play in the management and provision of EC education. They include the perceptions of parents and educational leaders, the cost of foundation education and the socio-economic status of parents. Another issue that emerged from the responses was that out of the six ECD centres only two were following policy regulations on teacher pupil ratio. Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 Education, among other things stipulates that the teacher pupil ratio had to be 1:20. At ECD level children need individualised attention if they are to get the full benefits of foundation education.

The role of ECD teachers

Teachers must interpret the curriculum, plan and teach the subjects that contribute to the development of learners. School heads, deputy heads and TICs are expected to play supervisory and management roles. Similarly, parents and the community are expected to contribute to the development of the ECD centre by providing the necessary resources and participate in health and nutrition programmes. The researcher had to visit at least one class at each of the six ECD centres. It was observed that all the ECD teachers had timetables and ECD syllabi. The following subjects and activities were displayed on the timetable for both ECD-A and ECD-B classes: Visual and Performing Arts, Language, Mathematics, Social Science and Science and Technology. Based on the timetable, it could be noted that the ECD teachers in both private and public centres were teaching subjects as provided by the syllabus. The ECD syllabus states that the ECD consists of five curriculum areas which are Expressive Arts, Language Arts, Mathematics and Science, Social Sciences and Technology (Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, 2012). The syllabus further breaks these curriculum areas into specific subjects.

The teaching approaches commonly used by ECD teachers, were the discovery method, play, song and dance, and games. Other approaches included the use of poems, experimentation, drama and field trips. These are some of the methods suggested in the ECD syllabus. The approaches make the child the centre of learning and this recognises the main principles of the Montessori approach.

The role of parents in the provision of Early Childhood Education

Parents can play a crucial role in the cognitive development of their children, in children's academic achievement and psychosocial competences by giving them the necessary attention when they ask questions, and collaboration contributes academic achievement (Sandin, 2023). They must provide a home environment that allows the child to freely handle and look at various pictures, books, good comics, and story books, audio and video programmes. The parent must monitor the relevance and importance of the material children are exposed to and provide the child with learning experiences. The involvement of parents in early childhood education has a motivational effect on the child and acts as an accurate predictor of a child's achievement in school. The school heads, deputy heads, TICs and SDC members acknowledged the role played by parents:

H1: Parents pay fees and are involved in building projects as they contribute development levies.

T4. Parents are involved in the food and nutrition programme, for instance the provision of porridge is funded by a donor agency and sadza is funded by the government of Zimbabwe. Parents through the SDC come to school to prepare meals and assist teachers in the actual feeding of learners.

TIC6. Parents are also involved in academic work through the homework class teachers give daily.

SDC1: This is our school. We do as much as we can to contribute to its development and the development of our children. However, we have challenges with the homework they are bringing home. The work is just too advanced for us parents to be effective in helping our children with their academic work.

There were no specific committees which related to the governance of the ECD centres at the schools. In all the centres, there were SDCs that related to governance of the mainstream school, not necessarily the ECD centres. Such an arrangement was most likely to impact negatively on the distribution of resources at the ECD centres. Parents also learn skills as they work at the centre through developmental orientation since they develop skills that benefit themselves, children, the centre, teachers and families. Parents were also involved in fund raising activities as noted by one of the participants:

H6: The involvement of parents and the community is multifaceted. Parents are involved in fundraising activities, contribute to the well-being of ECD programmes by funding programmes through fees and levies agreed in general meetings of parents and school development committees and employing paraprofessionals and caregivers.

The role of school heads in the Management and provision of Early Childhood Education

The role of the school head involves management and instructional leadership. Management and leadership processes involve planning, organising, staffing, directing, controlling, supervision and allocation of resources. As an instructional leader the school head is expected to monitor and implement the ECD programme. Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 Education stipulates that: school heads were expected to supervise and manage ECD centres, ensure that the centres were meeting the expected standards and were implementing policies as laid down by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and supervise their own ECD centres and private centres attached to their schools (Government of Zimbabwe, 2005). Most school heads noted that they had delegated their duties to TICs.

To establish the frequency of supervision of ECD teachers by school heads, school heads were asked to indicate how often they made class visits to supervise ECD teachers in the following curriculum areas: Expressive Arts; Language Arts; Mathematics and Science; Social Sciences; and Technology. The number of times the school heads at the centres visited classes for supervision differed from centre to centre. Two of the school heads indicated that they visited classes twice per term. Another two noted that they made class visits once a month. At the same time another two said that they assessed ECD teachers once per term. They also noted that they delegated the supervision function to deputy heads and TICs.

The frequency of class visits differed from centre to centre. It would appear as though there were no specific standards in terms of the number of times school heads assessed ECD classes and wrote supervision reports. The supervision of private centres was compromised, as most school heads noted that pressure of work left them with little time to visit private centres attached to their schools. This raises questions about standards and quality of foundation education and their compliance with government policy.

The role of TICs in the Management and Provision of Early Childhood education

TICs indicated their roles at ECD centres. Most TICs noted that their main roles were buying stationery and equipment, supervising ECD teachers and support staff, monitoring feeding programmes. Other responsibilities included ordering toys, organising meetings and functions such as graduations, working with parents to make toys, ordering books, and maintaining play centres. Some TICs noted that their role was to provide learning materials such as picture books, colouring books, organise sports and field trips, enrol children for ECD classes.

It could be noted that most TICs had assumed the full responsibilities of running and managing ECD centres as demonstrated by the wide range of roles they played. Their roles involved managing both human and material resources to achieve the goals of the ECD centres. Resources are a prerequisite for organisations to attain organisational goals. In view of the supervision three of the TICs noted that they conducted class visits for lesson observation once per term, two indicated that they visited classes twice per term, one supervised ECD teachers once per year. Like in the case of school heads, there appeared to be lack of consistency in terms of the frequency the TICs were expected to conduct class visits for supervision. These differed from centre to centre. They all noted that it was difficulty to perform management functions since they were also in charge of their own classes. One of the TICs had this to say:

TIC5: We are all aware of the importance of regular supervision of teachers since it is a tool that is helpful in the development of the teacher. Some teachers lack professional training in EC education. The challenge is that we also have classes to manage. That affects supervision and the standard of education.

This raises pertinent questions about the management and provision of EC education in both public and private schools.

Availability of resources and facilities at ECD centres

The data on resources and facilities was collected through observations and interviews with TICs. At centre number A, there were forty-five computers for the whole school which were to be shared with ECD classes, two ECD classrooms, eight child-sized toilet seats, one outdoor play centre which had inadequate playing equipment, and four ECD water points. Centre B had twenty computers for the whole school, no child-sized toilet seats, one play centre, and one ECD water point. Centre C had thirty computers for the whole school, no child-sized toilet seats, one outdoor play centre and two ECD water points. Centre D had twenty computers for the whole school, two ECD classrooms, no child-sized toilet seats, one outdoor play centre, and no water points specifically for ECD children. Centre E had twenty computers, three classrooms, fourteen child-sized toilet seats, one outdoor play centre, and six ECD water points. Centre F had twenty computers, three ECD classrooms, two child-sized toilet seats, one outdoor play centre, and four ECD water points. The play areas at the six ECD centres ranged from five to eight.

According to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education ECD Syllabus (2012) there are eight play areas that must be established in an ECD classroom, which are Art and Craft, Music, Movement and Dance, Language, Mathematics, Manipulative and Block, Science and Discovery, and Outdoor. Play areas help the teacher to plan and organise the day, at the same time making it easier for parents to see what the children are learning, provide children with a greater choice of activities as they can use different areas at the same time, and encourages active exploration and experimentation and understanding of concepts by children (Wood, 2013). Lack of such play areas in the ECD centres denied children the opportunity to learn through a variety of activities.

Most of the ECD centres had inadequate facilities and resources. ECD children had to share with the mainstream school. Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 stipulates the requirements for indoor playing space, outdoor playing space, and provision of toilets in the ratio of one flush-water closet or squat hole for every twelve children, separate toilet facilities, wash basins in the ratio one for every six children, adequate facilities for refrigeration, community-based feeding scheme and adequate classrooms (Government of Zimbabwe, 2005).

The provision of early childhood education in developing countries has been characterised by limited access as only 36% of pre-primary children received early childhood education in 2006, poor quality, lack of infrastructure, poorly trained teachers, inadequate funding, poverty, and inequitable distribution of resources (UNICEF, 2019).

Challenges faced by ECD centres

Some of the challenges included lack of adequate ECD materials for children, shortage of qualified personnel and teachers who did not specialise in early childhood education. Other challenges included shortage of classrooms, limited playgrounds and lack of play centre equipment. The major challenges can best be summarised by a response by the TIC at centre A who said:

The major challenges we are facing are lack of suitable infrastructure, lack of indoor and outdoor storage facilities, inadequate child-sized toilets and wash basins, inadequate indoor space for the eight play areas and insufficient outdoor play equipment and classes that are too big to manage.

The findings concur with studies by Takaendesa (2024) who observed several challenges in relation to the management and provision of early childhood education. These challenges included failure by infant teachers to upgrade themselves, inadequate supply of teachers and lack of material resources. Lack of resources to

provide early childhood education has negatively affected ECD programmes in these centres as noted by the following respondents:

T12: The provision of early childhood education is negatively affected by lack of funds to buy equipment and develop facilities specifically for ECD learners, and lack of ICT tools for learners. The other challenge is learner absenteeism and some parents who are not paying fees and development levies.

T10: The challenge we have is inadequate teacher education. Most of the ECD teachers lack the skills to effectively integrate technology into teaching and learning.

T9: School heads to not show much interest in early childhood education as most of the supervisory work is done by the TIC who has limited power when it comes to resource allocation and distribution. In some cases, classes for ECD-A and ECD-B are combined and this causes a threat to children's development. The failure by school heads to supervise ECD classes had much to do with their perceptions towards ECD. which they found to be negative.

T8: Senior teachers and school heads were not aware of the ECD requirements as ECD teachers are looked down upon. Most of the people have no idea about what early childhood education is all about.

The responses highlight important variables in the management and provision of early childhood education. These include negative perceptions of EC education by school heads, deputy heads, senior teachers and parents, and lack of facilities may be attributed to the negative attitudes and perceptions by those in decision making positions.

FINDINGS

The paper came up with the following findings:

- Teachers, deputy heads, school heads and parents have different perceptions of early childhood education. The notion of foundation education and the requirements for nine years of primary education is not yet fully understood and appreciated by some parents.
- Quality foundation education and resource provision are compromised in both private and public centres
- Government circulars and Policy are not being adhered in some cases for example the use of English as medium of instruction in private ECD centres, high teacher pupil ratio in public ECD centres and ratio of facilities to be shared by ECD learners.
- Qualifications of teachers at the ECD centres differed between public and private schools. Public schools had specialised ECD teachers and yet private centres had paraprofessionals, retired teachers and unqualified teachers
- There are no major differences in ECD curriculum Implementation in private and public centres, except for the medium of instruction which was English in all private centres.
- The inclusion of 'tots class' in some of the private ECD centres is a development that may be considered and regularised for all primary schools in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper came up with the following conclusions:

- Most school heads were not playing any major role in the management and supervision of ECD centres.
- TICs oversaw the management of ECD centres and the interpretation of the ECD curriculum.

- ECD teachers played their roles as caregivers and guides, as demonstrated by the different methods they used.
- The provision of early childhood education in some private centres may be compromised because most teachers were underqualified.
- Parents played an active role in providing resources, supporting food and nutrition programmes and construction of classrooms. The economic position of parents had a bearing on the development at the centres, as all centres did not receive funding from government.
- ECD teachers were implementing the curriculum and teaching areas as provided in the syllabus, as demonstrated by the timetables.
- The provision of EC education faced several problems which included lack of support from school heads due to low appreciation of the role of early childhood education, shortage of classrooms, lack of play equipment, and inadequate sanitary facilities, clean and reliable water.
- Parents still have negative attitudes towards ECD-A.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above conclusions, the paper came up with the following recommendations:

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should organise workshops for school heads, TICs, ECD teachers and parents as a way of capacitating them.
- Intensify the supervision and monitoring of the operations of the ECD centres by Education Officers in collaboration with other ministries such as the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare to check on health and safety provisions at ECD centres.
- Equitable distribution of resources at ECD level. The government should therefore play a major role in the funding of registered ECD centres.
- The training and engagement of ECD teachers must be intensified to improve the teacher pupil ratio.
- There should be a framework for the development of the '*tots class'* for ages 1.5 to 3 years.
- The government should make it mandatory for all ECD centres to employ qualified teachers.

IMPLICATIONS

- While the government of Zimbabwe has made great strides in ECD teacher education much still needs to be done on funding of early childhood education.
- Monitoring and supervision of ECD centres must be increased to ensure a quality foundation education.
- There is need to regularise the provision of early childhood education in both public and private ECD centres.
- Equity and inclusivity may not be attainable in early childhood education if parents continue to pay for the education of their children at foundation level. The state has an obligation to fund basic education, since it is an universal right

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