

Assessing the Benefits and Challenges of the Introduction of Early Childhood Development Education to the Infant Grade in the Zimbabwean Education System

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Abstract

This study aimed at assessing the benefits and challenges of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) education programme in Zimbabwean primary schools. In an attempt to gather data to enable the researchers to answer the research problem, the present study adopted the descriptive survey design since it was all about people's perceptions on successes and problems in ECD. Questionnaires and interviews were used to gather data from the respondents. Document analysis was used as a source of evidence to substantiate the claims on the statistics on drop out and retention rates. The population of the study consisted of all grade one teachers in Chegutu District, Mashonaland West Region. In all a total of 200 respondents made it into the sampling frame. Of these 200, only 50 were chosen into the sample through simple random sampling. Benefits accruing to the ECD programme were unearthed. These included among others, a reduction of time needed to explain concepts due to the pupils attending the ECD centres. Results also show that teachers felt relieved to teach the pupils who had gone through the ECD programme because they were already exposed to some class work. The classes experienced an improved pass rate in subsequent grades as a result of attending ECD programmes. Children who have gone through the ECD programme are well disciplined as a result of attending the centres. In spite of these successes, challenges are affecting the smooth flow of the ECD programme in Zimbabwe. There are inadequate and inappropriate classrooms for use by the ECD pupils. Para-professionals are being hired to teach the ECD classes and there are no Education Officers available for effective supervision. There is no adequate equipment and the standard of available equipment at the play centres is poor.

Keywords: *Early childhood development education, Infant grade, Education system*

1. Introduction

According to the Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (1999:261), Terms of Reference 2.1.2, the Commission was mandated to identify specific areas in the education system requiring reform on a short term, medium term and long term basis. The commission thus identified early childhood development and education as one of decisive areas where the foundation of basic principles and philosophy of Zimbabwe's education system would be laid so that a child is prepared to meet the challenges of the future.

Many children in the developing countries, for which Zimbabwe is one, are confronted with a difficult road ahead of their growth from infancy to adulthood. Accordingly, their transition from early childhood education to primary school is a difficult one because of the complexities in the availability of resources, both the personal resources that children bring to school and the conditions of the schools themselves which present obstacles to their successful adjustment (Halpern and Myers, 1985). Realising the need to harness the human resources for the future of the country, there is need to make sure that children receive a conducive environment that enables them to be prepared to learn right from birth.

Governments, the world over have therefore realised the importance of early childhood development whose focus is on the mental and social aspects of maturation in the first few years of life, hence the establishment of the Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training, in 1999 which identified early childhood development and education as one of the major aspects of Zimbabwe's education system. Ten years down the line, after the establishment of the commission, one would be interested to make a follow up on the Early Childhood Development programme in Zimbabwe to ascertain the contributions of the initiative as well as assess the challenges encountered in the implementation of the programme.

Background of the study

International recognition of ECD as an effective community development tool is relatively new particularly in the least developed countries where economic resources have even curtailed the provision of Basic Universal Primary Education (Myers, 1992). However, the need for childhood education has since ancient times been recognised as very critical to the child's development. Great philosophers of all time such as Plato, Aristotle and Quintillion, among others, have written immensely on children's need for education while at infancy (Manjengwa, 1994). Historically, formal early childhood education has arisen in response to the needs of middle and upper income groups of developed countries. Later on, it became a part of the educational system in the Third World (Baker, 1987). Traditionally conceived by western society as either the care of young children for working parents, or preschool for the middle-upper classes, ECD in Zimbabwe has also been previously regarded as a privilege for a few especially urban dwellers. Developed at sites such as health centres, clubs and community centres, the early ECD centres were created by the then Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs to take responsible care of children whose mothers were part of the few working women so that they would be free to work during the day. Since then the programme has received prominence as government even stepped in to provide facilities before the Nziramasanga Commission recommended that the programme be compulsory and be used as entry to Grade 1. While the majority of the primary schools have taken the initiative to introduce at least a class for the ECD children, a lot of successes have been scored. However, ten years on, one would be interested to make a follow up of the programme to ascertain the contributions of this very important initiative. At the same time, it also necessary to assess the challenges encountered in its implementation.

Motivation of the study

Assessing the benefits and challenges of Early Childhood Education in schools is a worthwhile undertaking so as to ascertain the effects and impediments of the infant programme. While follow up studies on the efficacy of ECD education have been carried out elsewhere, further studies need to be undertaken in the Zimbabwean primary schools. This is mainly because the ECD programme has just been launched under the auspices of the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture and there is therefore need for the follow up.

Statement of the problem

The rationale behind the implementation of ECD programmes is clear. The children going through the programme would become the drivers of the economy in the next few years of their lives. In order therefore, that the education of these young ones be the best ever they can get, this present study sought to find out the gains made to date and the areas facing challenges so that remedies can be suggested for the improvement of the ECD system. The question to be answered by the present study therefore is: What are benefits derived and impediments encountered in the introduction of the ECD programme in the Zimbabwean primary schools?

Research Questions

The current study was undertaken to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways has the introduction of ECD programmes benefited the schools?
2. How have the children benefited from the ECD programmes offered by the schools?

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3. What challenges have the schools faced in the implementation of the ECD programmes?
4. What measures should be instituted to minimise the effects of the encountered challenges?

2. Literature review

Defining Early Childhood Development Education

Early childhood has been defined as a period of life between 0 to 8 years of age (UNESCO, 1996). This is the period of greatest growth and development, when the brain develops most rapidly, almost at its fullest. It is a period when walking, talking, self-esteem, vision of the world and moral foundations are established.

A time of remarkable brain development, these years, 0 to 8 lay the foundation for subsequent learning (UNESCO Early Childhood Care and Education Unit, 1996). Evans et al. (2000) assert early childhood care and education as referring to the provision of all the support necessary for every child to realise his/her right to survival, to protection, to care and to education that thus ensuring optimal development from birth to age six. From the Zimbabwean context, the Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (1999:262) defines Early Childhood Development education as “a programme in Zimbabwe that provides for the care and education of children from 0 to 6 years...an endeavour to consciously promote a child’s development and education”.

Though deferring on the age range, it can therefore be deduced from the above citations that ECD is a holistic, integrated, inclusive approach to programming, research and policy for young children who need a healthy, safe and nurturing environment that includes opportunities to support them emotionally, socially, physically, cognitively and spiritually within the context of their community.

Previous research studies

The benefits of Early Childhood Education

A significant number of researchers have written on the positive effects of ECD programmes which are seen as transforming the development of children in all aspects of their lives (Young, 2002). According to Young (2002), ECD programmes benefited the poor and disadvantaged children and families since it has the potency to fight poverty and its educational implications in developing countries. Hereunder, the following section presents some of the perceived benefits of the ECD programmes.

Wylie, Hodgen, Hipkins and Vaughan (2009) and Myers (1992) remark that the period of early childhood development has a strong and positive impact on further development and children’s learning in later ages. Studies by Wylie et al (2009) indicate that attendees of ECD centres continued to benefit from their attendance 11 years later. In order to curb wastages in the education system, ECD has been touted in research studies as diminishing the potency to drop out of school and it has also been found out that grade repetition on primary education is lowered due to attendance in ECD education (Myers, 1992; Young, 2002). These findings were replicated in studies by Plan Bangladesh, among others, which found out that early stimulation and preparation for education enhance student learning in school and increases retention rates up to the terminal grades. There is also the reduced educational expenditure because of little or no need for remedial action for the slow learners since these are minimised through the ECD programmes (UNESCO, 1996). For the children who are not participants of ECD education, there are personal and social costs in the form of poor adjustment, continued high primary school repetition and dropout rates, and consequently, for the country, another generation of functional illiterates (Halpern and Myers, 1985). Thus ECD results in low cost to the financiers of education.

As per the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), ECD is a long-term plan for eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by developing a better skilled and more resilient population and

quality early childhood education improves the efficacy and cost efficiency of primary schooling by creating school readiness which leads to greater success and thus reduces grade repetition and drop out rates, an important step towards universal primary education (Young, 2002). Because they lay the foundations for acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills, they help reduce dropout and repetition rates and if well managed, they generate a predisposition of the child towards learning and attending school (UNESCO, 1996).

Also quality early childhood education programmes tend to provoke greater demand and attention to quality as children move up the ladder to primary education; therefore a good early childhood programme helps improve all aspects of quality of education (Wylie et al, 2009). ECD and other pre-primary education programmes are widely recognised as having a significant and positive impact on the subsequent performance of children in basic education programmes.

Research in the Chicago (USA) has shown that children who did not participate in ECD education were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18. In Michigan, 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families who did not receive preschool were likely to have become chronic lawbreakers by age 27 than those who were assigned to the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation's Perry Preschool programme (HighScope, 2005). Thus ECD has been instrumental in reduction of crime in later lives of attendees.

Research by UNESCO (1996) indicates that there is improved preparation of children for primary education especially in the development of basic skills such as reading, writing, numeracy and language learning. The detection, treatment, correction, improvement and prevention of nutritional, health, physical or mental defects and the early removal of learning difficulties is also catered for in ECD programmes. Children are also provided with the opportunity to develop positive attitudes, self-confidence, motivation and ability to learn which are conducive to the child's development, happiness and success at school. ECD education also leads to the development of capable children who will eventually contribute to a society of educated, responsible and productive citizens (UNESCO, 1996).

A significant factor common to children who repeat classes is related to their initial lack of readiness for learning in reading, writing, numeracy and language acquisition as well as unpreparedness for entry into primary schools (UNESCO, 1996).

Further benefits of ECD education include their care and stimulation, the identification and the correction of a variety of problems related to health, nutrition, physical and mental handicaps, pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-numeracy skills, the development of the joy of exploration, experimentation, a heightened sense of curiosity, a love for learning and motivation. Thus to ignore ECD education of children before their entry into primary education is to jeopardise their educational success at their later levels of learning and education (Young, 2002).

The main purpose of linking early childhood development and education and primary education is to ensure that there is a smooth transition for children from one level of learning to another (UNESCO, 1996). ECD is also designed to stimulate children's interest in learning, to prepare them for further stages in the educational process, to ensure that certain basic skills are mastered and to do so in accordance with the child's mental and physical development. This is necessary in order to help to reduce failures in academic and social achievement and to help children to adjust to the environment and demands of their future learning institutions. It is also important to note that ECD ensures that pupils are ready for primary education. ECD also ensures that certain basic skills are mastered before the pupils in primary school.

Wylie et al (2009) argue that high-quality Early Childhood Education centres provide lasting benefits for the participants regardless of their family backgrounds. They further argue that children benefit from ECE experience and, in particular, from quality interactions with staff and the benefits of ECE extend well

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beyond childhood. Thus benefits accruing to ECD pupils are outcomes of quality initiatives from the system.

According to Halpern and Myers (1985) more children without ECE experience drop out of school than those with ECE experience. A more logical deduction is that the large percentage of dropouts at this stage may be due to the lack of holding power of the primary schools in terms of both pedagogy and environment. It is concluded that while the ECE experience does help reduce the total number of dropouts, its impact can be maximised by effecting qualitative improvement in terms of child-centred, activity based pedagogy at the early primary stage in addition to providing ECE, to attract and retain children (Wylie et al, 2009).

Later, et al, (1982) cited by Halpern and Myers (1985) points out that early education teaches children some concrete cognitive skills and also exposes them to some school-relevant non-cognitive skills such as attentiveness to teachers, ability to follow instructions, and task perseverance. When such children enter first grade they have positive attitudes towards classroom activities, are able to adapt to classroom procedures, and are able to learn and do the schoolwork. The children's positive attitudes toward school are reinforced; they feel competent and their teachers identify them as competent and treat them as such (Later et al, 1982 cited in Halpern and Myers 1985). It can be deduced therefore that pupil competence in primary as well as in later educational levels, is a result of attending ECD education.

Challenges encountered in the implementation of ECD programmes

Research carried out elsewhere reveals that challenges continue to bedevil the ECD programme. Mohiuddin (2008) identified the challenges through observations made during visits to primary schools. The challenges are namely: lack of vertical integration and continuity in planning; placement of inexperienced teachers in preparatory classes; over-crowded classes with disproportionate teacher/pupil ratio; multi-grade settings with persons untrained to teach in these situations: evidence of parents, continuing to paint a "frightening" picture of primary school to their children. Mohiuddin (2008) asserts that in most schools, the number of children is so high that it becomes very difficult for teachers to maintain one to one relationships with children. Eckerman and Whitehead (1999) argue for material resources when they remark that children learn through play, and their play is more cognitively mature in the presence of materials and peers. It follows therefore that in the absence of these resources, ECD is bound to face challenges.

3. Methodology

This study, in an attempt to assess the benefits and challenges of ECD adopted the descriptive survey design since it was all about people's perceptions on successes and problems in ECD. Surveys have the advantages that they can be used to collect a lot of data with relatively small expenses and that data comes from the real world situation. The current study employed a multi-technique approach to data collection in order to obtain a holistic or total view of the teachers on the benefits of the introduction of ECD education to the primary schools in Zimbabwe. A combination of the self-administered questionnaires and interviews, as data collection instruments, was therefore, preferred. This enabled the facilitation of gathering valid and reliable data from the respondents over and above enabling triangulation to cross validate the validity and reliability of the solicited data. The combination of the instruments ensured that the weaknesses of one instrument were compensated for by the strength of another. Document analysis was used as a source of evidence to substantiate the claims on the statistics provided particularly on the retention and drop out rates in the different schools.

A pilot study was carried out with 20 respondents to pre-test the instruments before the final data gathering process. The pre-test enabled the researchers to adjust the instruments and make amendments to the documents. This helped to enhance validity and reliability of the measuring instruments. The

researcher requested the respondents to answer and then comment on the items in the questionnaires. Feedback from the piloting process was used to revise the questionnaire, and to provide further training on how the questionnaire was to be administered, and on issues of clarity, relevance and adequacy of the responses. This enabled the researcher to make improvements to the questionnaires. The researcher tested the questionnaires' reliability by giving the same questions to the same 20 respondents, after which the final draft of the questionnaire was produced.

Population and Sample

The population of the study consisted of all the 200 grade one teachers in Chegutu District, Mashonaland West Region. Of these, 50 were chosen through simple random sampling which entailed getting a list of all these teachers from the district office. Two hundred discs with corresponding numbers were put in a hat and picked one at a time until fifty teachers had been obtained. Fifty respondents represent 25% of the population and according to Van Dalen (1979) and Tuckman (1994) a sample size of 10% to 20% of population is representative enough.

4. Presentation and discussion of results

Table 1: The perceived benefits of ECD programmes to the Grade 1 teacher

Benefit to teacher	YES		NO	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Reduced time on explaining on concepts	42	84	8	16
Light work because certain basic skills are already mastered	44	88	6	12
There is reduced educational expenditure because of little or no need for remedial action	41	82	9	18
Children adapt easily to classroom procedures	45	90	5	10
Children are able to learn easily	43	86	7	14
Improved pass rate in subsequent grades	45	90	5	10
Children are well disciplined as a result of attending ECD education	46	92	4	8

Results in Table 1 above show that a majority of 42(84%) teachers felt that there was a reduction of time needed to explain on concepts due to the pupils attending the ECD centre. This was mostly due to the fact that the pupils were already exposed to some of the material being learnt. Light work because certain basic skills were already mastered was a benefit according to 44(88%) respondents. Teachers felt relieved to teach the pupils who had gone through the ECD programme because they were already exposed to some class work. The findings replicate those by Later, et al, (1982) and Halpern and Myers (1985) who point out that early education teaches children some concrete cognitive skills and also exposes them to some school-relevant non-cognitive skills such as attentiveness to teachers, ability to follow instructions, and task perseverance.

Some 41(82%) respondents indicated that there was reduced educational expenditure because of little or no need for remedial action. Time, for example, was fully utilised as there was no wastage as is the case in situations whereby children are failing to understand concepts and repeatedly seek clarification. According to 45(90%) teachers, children adapted easily to classroom procedures and 43 (86%) teachers felt that children were able to learn easily due to their previous attendance of ECD classes. A majority of 45 (90%) indicated that improved pass rate in subsequent grades were a result of ECD programmes (Wylie et al, 2009). Therefore a good early childhood programme helps improve all aspects of quality of education. Early UNESCO (1996) concurs by remarking that ECD has a significant and positive impact

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on the subsequent performance of children in basic education programmes since they lay the foundations for acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills, they help reduce dropout and repetition rates.

According to 46(92%) respondents, children who have gone through the ECD programme were well disciplined as a result of attending the centres. The results of the current study agree with those by HighScope (2005) in a research Chicago which established that children who did not participate in ECD education more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18. In Michigan, children from low-income families who did not receive preschool were likely to become chronic lawbreakers by age 27 than those who received it (HighScope, 2005).

Table 2: The perceived benefits of ECD programmes to the Grade 1 pupil

Benefit to teacher	YES		NO	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
They show positive attitudes towards classroom activities	44	88	6	12
They are able to adapt to classroom procedures quickly	43	86	7	14
They show a more positive attitude towards school	45	90	5	10
They are motivated to learn and do their schoolwork more effectively.	44	88	6	12
They are more competent	46	92	4	8
There are reduced drop out rates	18	36	32	64
Development of motor skills	43	86	7	14
Improved language development due to interaction	42	84	8	16
Supervision made easy because pupils already acquainted to the school system.	40	80	10	20
Improved learning readiness	35	70	15	30

Asked what the perceived benefits were to the pupils, 44(88%) indicated that the pupils showed positive attitudes towards classroom activities. According to 43(86%) teachers, the pupils were able to adapt to classroom procedures quickly since they were already exposed to some of these procedures from their ECD programme. According to 45 (90%) respondents the pupils attending ECD centres show a more positive attitude towards school whereas 44 (88%) indicated that the pupils are motivated to learn and do their schoolwork more effectively.

A majority of 46 (92%) indicated that the toddlers were more competent than those who went straight into the Grade 1 without having gone through ECD. The children's positive attitudes toward school are reinforced; they feel competent and their teachers identify them as competent and treat them as such (Later et al 1982, Wylie et al, 2009).

However, according to a majority of 32(68%) respondents, the system had not experienced reduced drop out rates. This goes to show that attendance at ECD was not a factor towards improved retention rates. Contrary to these findings, research elsewhere points towards drop-out and grade repetition at primary school level being lowered due to attendance at ECD centres (Myers, 1992; Young, 2002). Plan Bangladesh also found out that early stimulation and preparation for education increases retention rates up to the terminal grades thereby contradicting the results of the present study.

Forty-three (86%) teachers stated that those who had gone through the ECD centres had benefitted through the development of motor skills and 42 (84%) indicated that language development due to interaction was one of the benefits attained through the ECD programme. UNESCO (1996) concurs by indicating that there is improved preparation of children for primary education in the development of basic skills such as reading, writing, numeracy and language learning.

The results also show that supervision was made easy due to the fact that pupils had already got acquainted to the school system and were not overwhelmed by the new environment. This was according to 40(80%) of the teacher respondents. Thirty-five (70%) indicated that pupils benefited through improved learning readiness as they were exposed to some of the pertinent issues in the learning environment. Social and emotional competencies are commonly identified by teachers as the most important indicators of school readiness in young children (Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The United Nations MDGs, help in supporting the findings of the present study by arguing that ECD is a long-term plan that develops a better skilled and more resilient population and improves the efficacy and cost efficiency of primary schooling by creating school readiness (Young, 2002).

Table 3: Challenges in the implementation of ECD programmes in schools

Challenges	Yes		No	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
There are inadequate classrooms	46	92	4	8
Available classrooms not per required standard	45	90	5	10
Furniture not suitable for the children	47	94	3	6
Picture reading books not adequate	48	96	2	4
Inadequate teachers- Para professionals being hired	45	90	5	10
Ineffective supervision- No Education Officers available	46	92	4	8
Play centre equipment inadequate and of poor standard	47	94	3	6
There is over-crowding in classrooms with disproportionate teacher/pupil ratio	46	92	4	8
There are multi-grade settings for Grade A and B	28	56	22	44

Results in the above table show that 46(96%) of the respondents indicated that there were inadequate classrooms meant for use by the ECD pupils. According to 45 (90%) teachers, the available classrooms were not as per the required standard. This meant that ECD pupils were required to learn in the traditional classrooms already in existence at the schools. Furniture was also not suitable for the children. Some were unable to rest their feet on the floor whilst sitting on the chairs. Others struggled to climb up the chair once they disembarked. Basic picture reading books were not adequate, according to an overwhelming majority of 48 (96%) of the respondents. It is apparent that resources of all sorts are inadequate as another 45 (90%) indicated that para-professionals were being hired to teach the ECD classes. This therefore compromised the quality of learning achieved in the classes.

To make matters worse, there are no Education Officers available thereby rendering supervision ineffective. Forty-six teachers indicated the nonexistence of Education Officers as a drawback while 47 (94%) indicated that inadequate and of poor standard of equipment at the play centres were a serious challenge.

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There is over-crowding in classrooms with disproportionate teacher/pupil ratio, according to 46(92%) of the respondents. Individual attention to the pupils was therefore affected since the teacher had a huge number of pupils to attend to.

Another serious challenge according to 28 (56%) of the respondents, has been the multi-grade settings for Grade A and B. Both grades learn in a compound class, this being a result of teacher shortage as well as inadequate classrooms. The findings replicate those by Mohiuddin (2008) who found that inexperienced teachers were employed for preparatory classes and there was over-crowding in classes with disproportionate teacher/pupil ratio. Multi-grade settings were also the order of the day as teachers taught mixed classes.

5. Conclusion

It is apparent from the findings of the present study that government has embarked on a programme in which resources are inadequate and the requirements of Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training requiring that there be ECD education for the under 5s are unlikely to be met due to numerous impediments. The following are the major challenges facing the ECD programme in Zimbabwe.

- There are inadequate and inappropriate classrooms for use by the ECD pupils. ECD pupils are learning in the traditional classrooms already in existence at the schools.
- Furniture and basic picture reading books are inadequate and unsuitable for the children.
- Para-professionals are being hired to teach the ECD classes and there are no Education Officers available for effective supervision.
- There is no adequate equipment and of standard of available equipment at the play centres is poor.
- There is over-crowding in classrooms with a disproportionate teacher/pupil ratio.
- There has been multi-grade settings for Grade A and B. Both grades learn as a compound class.

However, the current study established the following benefits of ECD:

- There was a reduction of time needed to explain concepts due to the pupils attending the ECD centres.
- Teachers felt relieved to teach the pupils who had gone through the ECD programme because they were already exposed to some class work.
- There was reduced educational expenditure because of little or no need for remedial action.
- Children adapted easily to classroom procedures and they were able to learn easily due to their previous attendance of ECD classes.
- The classes experienced an improved pass rate in subsequent grades as a result of attending ECD programmes.
- Children who have gone through the ECD programme are well disciplined as a result of attending the centres.
- The pupils were able to adapt to classroom procedures quickly since they were already exposed to some of these procedures from their ECD programme.
- The pupils are motivated to learn and do their schoolwork more effectively.
- Attendance at ECD centres has not contributed meaningfully towards improved retention rates.

Implications for the future

Drawing from the above findings, a lot needs to be done to improve the current status of ECD programmes in Zimbabwe. There is need to train more teachers for the ECD programmes. Since distance education programmes are known to churn out huge numbers of graduates without taking the student

away from the workplace, there is need to invigorate teacher training through distance education. The Zimbabwe Open University after having introduced the ECD degree programme needs to aggressively market the programme. The training of such teachers should be invigorated to boost the numbers of appropriate teachers within a short space of time. However, there is need to start off the training at diploma level and increase enrolments in teachers colleges. Parents should be encouraged to send their children to ECD programmes in light of the benefits derived from the initiative. Appropriate facilities and infrastructure, through a multi-stakeholder initiative must be improved. Parents and teachers partnership is essential to achieve the desired results in early childhood education.

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