

# **Quality of education Early Childhood Development Class B learners in Zimbabwe: Case Study of Gweru Primary Schools**

By

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## **Abstract**

*This paper presents research conducted on the quality of administration, teaching and learning of Early Childhood Development B learners (5-6 year olds) popularly known as Grade Zero in Zimbabwe. The work was conducted in the Gweru primary schools. Using the descriptive survey administration, teaching and learning of the five to six year olds in Gweru primary schools was examined. The data was collected using interviews and observations coupled with observation. Results were blended with related literature to examine the viability of the inclusion of Early Childhood Development B learners in primary schools. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of data were applied to a sample of five schools. Results from the study indicated that the Early Childhood Development B inclusion in primary schools was not quite viable as it failed to cater for the all-round development of learners. For instance age appropriate equipment were not available and appropriate activities were not being administered and thus the environment itself was not conducive to the age group's needs of learning through play.*

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Development, class B learners, grade zero, learning through play.*

## **1. Introduction**

Globally there has been much attention given to the millennium development goals which include the provision of education and care among all other age groups including the zero to eight year olds. Although politicians, educators and parents have opinions about Early Childhood Development Education and Care unfortunately there is very little research done of current activities. The lack of literature and research linked to the implementation and inclusion of Early Childhood Development (ECD) B in the primary schools makes it difficult for all concerned to come up with informed decisions that go beyond subjective information. However, in spite of its inclusion in primary schools, there is little uniformity and in its teaching and learning policies.

Historically, prior to the Jomtien Conference of 1990, as reported by Matsuura (2000) most countries knew about Early Childhood Development but were not committed to try and change the services they were offering. However, the Jomtien Conference, 1990, marked a historical moment for the entire zero to six year olds. It saw several countries including Zimbabwe signing the protocol on the provision of education for all including the zero to six year olds.

Quoting the Jomtien Conference 1990 deliberations, Evans (2002) suggests that the investment in the ECD stage gives social and economic benefits to the country. As a follow up to the signed protocol, the Dakar Conference of 2000 was convened to evaluate participant countries' response to the Jomtien Conference of 1990's deliberations on Early Childhood Development, Education and Care. Matsuura, (2000) giving a report on the Dakar Conference of 2000, in which Zimbabwe participated, says there is need to expand and improve ECEC for the zero to six year olds, the vulnerable and the disabled. One of the agreements endorsed by participant countries was that all signatories to those conferences must make education accessible for all the zero to six year olds.

As a follow up to these discussed conferences, in Africa the period around 1990 marked significant changes in ECEC just as it did globally. On November 20 1980, Convention of Rights for Children was formerly adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and the signing of the rights commenced in January 1990 and among the rights was the right to education.

Bridgemohan (2001) writing about South Africa on Early Childhood Development says that ECEC started in 1994. The research states that prior to 1994, ECD programmes were purely racial as financial support for black children's education and care was minimal while for the white children, it was quite substantial. According to Bridgemohan (2001) 1995 saw the birth of the reception class (Grade R) to redress the transitional problems faced by disadvantaged learners as they entered primary school. This reception class was made up of five to six year olds. The administration of the reception class was under two ministries, that is the Ministry of Education and that of Social Welfare (UNESCO, 2005). By the time of the research, the reception class was being housed in the public primary schools, communities and private institutions. It must be noted however that funding from the South African Government was limited in urban centres but substantial in rural areas.

Regarding Zimbabwe, the Nziramasanga Commission (1999) asserts that ECD programmes date back to the pre-colonial era, and was mostly catering for white children. The Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs according to the UNESCO report (2005) launched ECEC in 1981. The programme catered for zero to six year olds and was community based. This implied that the community looked for the teachers, sourced for materials, equipment and infrastructure without the Government's support. The Nziramasanga Commission (1999) also states that the main objectives were to promote holistic development of all children by offering a stimulating environment to enable them to explore and reach their potential for schooling and lifelong learning. Zimbabwe like any other country was influenced by the Jomtien Conference of 1990 and the Dakar Conference of 2000 hence the establishment and running of ECD programmes in 2005.

In this vein, this study looked at Zimbabwe's position regarding ECD integration, administration and running in Gweru urban and peri-urban schools after the world conferences discussed above and the Nziramasanga Commission (1999) recommendations. Among the recommendations made by the Nziramasanga Commission (1999), which was a Presidential Commission of enquiry in education at all levels, was the fact that education should be accessible to all especially the zero to six year olds. The Nziramasanga Commission (1999)'s findings were that private pre-schools or nursery schools' education and care was very expensive and hence not affordable for the poor children. It is from this finding that the commission recommended that ECD A (3-4 year olds) and B (5-6 year olds) be accommodated in formal schools. That way the school fees and levies would be under the control and regulation of the central government and thus making it fairly affordable for all. From this backdrop, the intention of this study was to assess the standards of education and care of ECD B learners currently on offer versus the guidelines of the Education Act of 1987 and directives as amended by the Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 and the inclusion policy in the Gweru primary schools in line with the stipulated children's curriculum which includes play as a mode of learning leading to children's all round development.

The policy itself was decreed in Circular Minute Number 14 of August 2004 informing all primary schools to increase children's access to Early Childhood Development Education and Care by attaching ECD A and B to formal schools from the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture. The five to six year olds, according to the policy, would engage in pre-formal activities and this policy had to be implemented in January 2005. To further emphasize the need for this policy's implementation an Education Director's Circular Minute Number 12 was issued in 2005. This stated guidelines of how to run these programmes under the hospice of the Education Act of 1987 and as amended by the Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005. It was against this understanding that the quality of education and care of ECD programmes in primary schools was investigated.

### ***The Term Early Childhood Development (ECD)***

In Zimbabwe ECD B (5-6 year olds) is commonly referred to as grade zero by the lay person. However, specialists in the area regard B as starting from age 5-6 years while they refer the zero to eight year olds as ECD. This view is supported by the Jomtien Conference of 1990's deliberations as reported by UNESCO (2005) suggesting that, ECD consists of those services provided to the zero to eight year olds which include education and care. From this end it is interesting to see that this term has gone through different stages of terminology change. Terms like Pre-school, Nursery School, Pre-primary as well as ECEC have been used in an evolutionary manner and they all referred to the age zero to six years. Particularly in Zimbabwe the terms were used to describe organized activities of the zero to six year olds. Morrison (1995) justifies the shift of the terms Pre-school and Nursery school, to ECD. He states that the terms Pre-school and Nursery school created images of formal school and referred to educational attitudes and values of adults. In support the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs module (MCDWA 1986:7) suggests that, "the term pre-school is limited and narrow and tends to see the ECD programme as preparing for formal school". To run away from the educational emphasis, the Minister of Women Affairs then responsible for ECD is quoted in the MCDWA (1986:12) as saying, "In conformity with the United Nations recommendations, my Ministry has resolved that the zero to six year olds programmes shall hence forth be called Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)". This implies that the ECEC is comprehensive and refers to all aspects of development, growth and care. It is notable that all these terms have influenced each other historically even to this day as the zero to six year olds are called ECD classes. In this research study ECD B refers to the five to six year olds engaging in pre-formal activities in preparation for a smooth transition to grade one within the primary schools.

### ***The influence of play on the development of the ECD B learners.***

Nutbrown quoted in Faber and Van Staden (1997) suggests in his research that play is essential for children's intellectual and emotional development as it enhances further development. Morrison (1995) suggests that play develops competencies such as; persistence, flexibility and creativity. Therefore play is significant for the total development of the learner. In support, Faber, (1982:2) states that, "Young children must play to learn". In other words play is not a pastime but an activity which they tackle with all their ability and seriousness of purpose.

In view of its importance, it is necessary for the teacher to plan for a variety of activities. For example fantasy play or make believe play acts as a child's way of observing and understanding the world around him or her. Thus the teacher for ECD B learners should plan and provide kitchen utensils and industry material for rich play. Van Staden (1997) posits that fantasy play is spontaneous, planned and placed without the interference of adults. Learners express their emotions and thus are healed emotionally and psychologically in the process. Cultural values, norms and practices are learnt and as a result social skills are developed. In fantasy play children use thought and language. They employ language for example, when they are talking on the make believe phone and thus leading to the development of cognitive skills. Through fantasy play academic success is also experienced as well as problem solving skills. This understanding justified the importance of this study as it looked at the quality of play in the ECD class B which is a crucial teaching methodology in the ECD B learners' environment.

In order to enhance the ECD B learner holistically the learners need exposure to block play. In this view, MCDWA (1996) postulates that block play enables learners to develop a better understanding of their world. They also learn discriminatory skills when given blocks of different colours, sizes and shapes. Together with this corner a manipulative corner is also a necessity as it helps the learners to develop fine and gross motor skills as well as eye and hand coordination. In support Stebbing (1999) says that, manipulative play activities like puzzles and bead work improve visual recognition and problem solving skills. Examples of manipulative games include matching games and bead work which help to improve language usage, abstract reasoning and concentration. Again from this understanding the research looked

at the quality of play equipment and activities versus physical, emotional, social, intellectual and aesthetic development of the learners.

It is notable that the indoor and outdoor play areas need to be balanced. This implies that when planning the ECD B play environment equal opportunity has to be given to learning through play. Further, when planning these play areas the safety of these learners must be kept in mind. Heckman (2000) suggests that when planning any play activity, five to six year olds must be given enough space to climb, run, balance and develop motor skills. A play area should thus provide media for the children's discovery learning through experimentation. It was against this background that the research was carried out to observe the methodology used in transmitting the ECD B curriculum to the learners.

## 2. Methodology

The researcher used the descriptive survey method which according to Patton (2005) involved observing what she saw and in this case the ECD B teachers' way of imparting knowledge and curriculum. In this research, descriptive survey methodology involved describing beyond the implied meaning, for example in observing the activities offered, one could see the teachers' level of specialization in the ECD area. Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh, (1995) suggest that, the descriptive survey methodology aims at obtaining information concerning current status of the phenomena. In this study the design sought to obtain information on the inclusion of ECD B (5-6 year olds) in formal schools and in particular the quality of activities offered by ECD B teachers to the learners versus their child centredness as well as the appropriateness of the play equipment available at the centre. The researcher used observations coupled with checklists or observation schedules and interviews.

### *Observations*

As descriptive survey researchers, non-participant observations of the teachers' activities and school environment were made. The non-involvement gave the researchers the opportunity to assess whether the ECD B teachers handled the learners in all areas of development with specialisation required for that age group. In non-participant observation according to Chisaka (2007), the researcher is detached which is as important to research as participation. The observations enabled the researchers to tally teacher's provided activities versus expected standards and play equipment appropriateness in the ECD environment. They were also able to assess the appropriateness of the programmes by observing activities being offered to the ECD B learners. During the observations and note taking, the researchers took note of pertinent issues that needed follow up in interviews and informal conversations.

Teachers were interviewed following presentation of children's activities to get the rationale for presenting or not presenting age appropriate equipment and activities to the ECD B learners. Observations of appropriateness of children's activities were also observed against Table 1: while observations of appropriateness of play equipment were recorded versus Table 2: aspects. Age appropriateness of the furniture and infrastructure was also observed against Table 3: observation schedule.

**Table 1: Observation schedule for activities offered by class B teachers in all five schools catering/not catering for the children's all round development.**

Intellectual Yes No	Social Yes No	Physical Yes No	Aesthetic Yes No	Emotional Yes No
Counting	Wendy house	Scissors	Music rings	Water play
Shapes	Role play	Running	Painting	Sand play
Story time	Music ring	Action songs	Colouring	Welcoming time
Picture discussion	Block play	Puzzles	Cutting	Weekend rings
Matching	Dressing up	Bead work	Pasting	Talking about life
Book corner	Traditional Games	Needle work	Collage	Listening games
Rhymes	Fantasy play	Tying activities	Drawing	Bead work
Colors	Drama	Physical games	Free Drawing	Bible stories

These observations were recorded in the checklist against the expected standard of catering for the all-round development of the learners and age appropriateness as suggested by the Nziramasanga Commission (1999). The appropriateness of the activities was represented by a yes and the non-appropriateness of the activity was represented by a no in Tables 1, 2 and 3. Furthermore the appropriateness of the activities was assessed against the stipulations of running ECD as stated in the Education Act of 1987 and as amended by the Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 which says that all activities and play equipment should be child centred and should cater for the all-round development of the learners.

**Table 2: Schedule of observations the availability/unavailability of the outdoor child-sized play equipment at each of the five schools.**

<b>Equipment and play areas</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Merry go round		
Slides		
Sand pit and sand pit toys		
Tyres		
Jungle gyms		
Wheel barrows		
Bicycles		
See Saw		
Balls		
Foot/net ball pitch		
Wendy House		
Construction House		
Cars		

**Table 3: Observation checklist showing the availability/non availability of child sized furniture and infrastructure at each of the five schools.**

<b>Furniture and materials</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Chairs		
Tables		
Scissors		
Toilets		
Wash basins		
Playing space		

### ***Interviews***

Interviews are critical in descriptive survey as they assist in the provision of background information on the participants such as their understanding and experiences of teaching and caring for ECD children. They provide the participants with an opportunity to clearly express their feelings, emotions and perceptions which gave the researchers an opportunity to physically experience the ECD B learners and teachers' environment through a participant's emotional expressions. Interviewees were purposely sampled having targeted all the school heads and ECD B teachers of the five schools sampled for the research study. The schools selected were one from former group A government schools, one from former group B government schools, one from the city council schools, one from a church owned and run school and one from Gweru peri-urban schools. However the variation of the selection of these schools was not for comparison purposes but just to observe how far the schools met the stipulated standards of running an ECD B environment as per the statutory instrument 106 of 2005 from different angles. In this regard, Paton (1990) suggests that there is logic in selecting information rich cases for study in depth. In this view information rich cases were the five schools which had implemented the inclusion of ECD B in

primary schools. Information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about the issue of central importance to the purpose of the study.

The purpose of this study was to look at the quality of administration of teaching and of ECD B learners in primary schools and hence the need to purposely select the sample. Consequently in an attempt to find out the administrators and ECD B teachers' administrative and skills as well as attitude, open ended interviews were used to ascertain that. Babbie (1992) notes the importance of interviews as giving background information on participants and that the researcher gains information that cannot be accessed through observation for example feelings and intentions.

### ***Compliance with ethical standards***

Permission to conduct research at the primary schools in the Midlands Region from which Gweru primary schools belong was obtained from the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture in the Midlands Regional Directors' Offices which then signed and stamped the researcher's letter of request to carry out the research and thus giving her permission to go ahead with the research. Furthermore, the school heads of the respective schools stamped and signed the letter from the Midlands Regional Director's office to acknowledge receipt of the letter and in agreement to participate in the study.

Before carrying out interviews and observations, participants were informed that the interview responses and observations were confidential and that they had the option to withdraw from participation. The names of the schools were kept confidential and this was demonstrated by the use of pseudo- names of these schools in the data analysis.

## **3. Results**

An observation schedule or checklist to ascertain whether the ECD class B environment within the Gweru primary schools caters for the all-round development of the learners was completed on the spot by the researchers. The main purpose was to observe and make a written record on whether all areas of development were fully addressed through the provision the play equipment and child centred activities which catered for the all-round development of class B learners.

**Table 4: Findings of the observations on whether child appropriate activities were being offered to the ECD B learners in all five schools.**

<b>Area of development</b>	<b>Positive response</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Negative response</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
Physical Development	20	67	10	33	30	100
Social development	15	50	15	50	30	100
Aesthetic Development	16	46	19	54	35	100
Emotional Development	30	86	5	14	35	100
Intellectual Development	28	93	2	7	30	100

From Table 4, all the five schools were giving thorough attention towards intellectual development. As per the displayed results 93% of the intellectual learning and teaching material and activities were present while 7% of developmentally appropriate activities and play materials were absent. It meant that the schools under observation put emphasis on school readiness as evidenced by the high positive response rate. It could be because they did not have enough material and financial resources to balance the all-round development of the learners. It might also have meant that the teachers considered ECD class B programme as meant for teaching pre-formal activities in preparation for formal learning. Among the activities being given were counting, shapes, and story time which did not need much equipment. Weikart

(2000) in support says that putting emphasis on school readiness is fruitful in that learners adjust well in formal school. However this emphasis on school readiness or intellectual development is criticized by Taylor (1995) as focusing on mastery of formal skills when learners may not be ready for them thus lending itself to drilling than developing life skills. It showed that the over emphasis on intellectual development was a sign that material and financial resources were not available to run the ECD programmes effectively. It may also be because teachers did not really know what to do so as to cater for the all-round development of the learners since according to the bio-data collected most of them were para-professionals and not trained specialists in the ECD area.

On physical development, three of the five schools represented by 33% had no play equipment except the open play space. The other two schools with the representation of 67% did not have much play equipment. The equipment that they used belonged to the infant school and thus was not appropriate for the five to six year olds. This goes against Currie (2001) who states that children's physical environment should be such that the child learns through manipulation of the play equipment and thus learns through discovery and exploration. The interviews for school heads further indicated that the inclusion of the ECD class B learners in the primary schools was just a burden as they were forced to create room where there is already scarce infrastructure. Sometimes this lack of infrastructure forced them to create room in the basement or in an all-purpose hall which was not well ventilated as specified by the Education Act 1987 and as amended by Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 and was thus a health hazard to the physical development of the learners.

Table 4 also notes that in social development all the play areas like the sandpit, water play area etc, were lacking as represented by the 50% negative responses and 50% positive responses that stood for the two schools that tried to improvise the play areas. Among the play areas improvised were the dramatic play area, the book area, the science area, block area and the shop corner. One school did a splendid job in improvising but then the equipment was not quite up to expected standards as observed by the researcher. This implies that schools were not getting enough resources to cater for the social development of the learners as they lacked in quality provision of the dramatic play area, sand pit and shop corner to name but a few.

Aesthetic development according to Table 4 shows 46% positive responses and 54% negative responses which was a sign that schools lacked the necessary material resources for ECD B learner's aesthetic development. Among the expected play material as per the national guidelines were the scissors, crayons, paste, beads, puzzles, material for collage and glue, paint and paint brushes etc. This goes against Van Staden, (1997) who suggests that the early years of life are characterized by a strong need to create and appreciate artefacts and thus they lay the foundation for future artists. Shortage of aesthetic biased material might have been due to the fact that the time of the study most of the teachers were para-professionals and they did not quite know the activities to provide for these learners. It could also have been because while the teachers knew what materials should be given for aesthetic development, they did not have the financial resources to buy those articles. This point was actually supported by ECD B teacher interviews which indicated that they lacked funds to buy the necessary aesthetic biased equipment since they got most of the funding to run the ECD class B programme from the community.

Furthermore, Table 4 shows that schools had 86% positive responses on catering for the learner's emotional development. It was demonstrated by the teachers' ability to listen to the individual children's stories and to arbitrate fairly when the children disagreed during play time among other observable ways of boosting emotional development. This was an indication that the school environment catered largely for the children's emotional development. This might have been because all the teachers except for one had some knowledge of the specialized need for care of B learners being mothers and specialists in one form or another. The specialisation levels were once again ascertained through interviews with ECD B teachers and findings indicated that only two teachers out of the ten teachers under study were professionals while

the rest were para-professionals. The instinct of motherhood helped them to be sensitive to the learners' needs, listen to them patiently and foster their self-esteem and thus help boost their emotional development positively.

To further ascertain that the school environment catered for the all-round development of the children, an observation schedule or checklist recording availability and age appropriateness of play equipment was recorded as indicated in Table 5.

**Table 5: Findings on the observations made at all five schools on whether indoor, outdoor and child sized furniture were available.**

Area of Observation	Positive response	%	Negative Response	%	Total	%
Indoor play areas	14	35	26	65	40	100
Outdoor play areas	7	23	23	77	30	100
Child sized furniture	9	36	16	64	25	100

From Table 5, fourteen indoor play areas and equipment represented by 35% were available in all five schools while there was a frequency of 65% negative responses showing lack of indoor play equipment for the five schools. This meant that there were not enough age appropriate and child-sized resources in terms of things like jungle gyms, see saws, swings etc. This could have been because the schools had not managed to purchase the required play equipment and furniture due to financial constraints. More findings from Table 5 indicate that 23% outdoor play areas existed for all the five schools while there were 77% negative responses which showed non-existence of outdoor play areas. This showed that there was not enough child sized play equipment in the five schools. Finally the table indicates that, concerning the infrastructure and the child sized furniture positive responses are 36% while the negative responses are 64%. This indicates that schools did not have enough child sized furniture as well as infrastructure that suited ECD B learners. The researchers also observed from the schools under study that there were different colours and sizes of chairs. To explain this observation, the teachers said that they had to ask parents to donate the chairs and thus each child owned a chair and when he or she completed ECD B would take it home. However, for those parents who could not donate small chairs, their children had to sit on big and uncomfortable benches. This concurs with Pence (2004) who critiques that the public schools already cannot cater for senior students what more with the sensitive age group of the four to five year olds. This was very true from the Zimbabwean set up in that the senior grades did not have the required play equipment what more the provision of equipment for the five to six year olds.

In support all the school heads interviewed on whether they had enough resources echoed the findings of the researcher's observations that they did not have enough age appropriate play equipment to cater for the all-round development of the learners. On further probing the school heads said that they housed the five to six year olds in a hall or under trees in which case it was a health hazard. One school head of Muchakata School said that he was aware that the toilets needed cleaning constantly but there was no disinfectant or personnel to clean the toilets as per the health expectations. The researcher was invited by the four to five year olds who were playing in the toilet during toilet time and was shown crawling worms by these children. Those toilets were in any case used by all sorts of people being a church premises or public school or school thus a public place for all sorts of people. The seen crawling worms could have been a sign of little knowledge as to the sensitiveness health wise of this age group or due to lack of financial resources to buy the necessary disinfectant. This meant that schools did not have enough sanitary facilities, child sized furniture and age appropriate infrastructure that cater for the all-round development of the learners. This goes against the Nziramasanga Commission (1999)'s recommendation



which states that ECD B should focus on the holistic development, education and care of the ECD class B learners including their safety, protection and cultural fairness.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to ascertain whether the administration and running of the ECD centres were meeting the all-round development of the learners as per the expected national standards. The findings indicated that the play equipment were very minimal and were not child-sized. The research also showed that the activities being offered were more inclined to intellectual development than any other area of development. This intellectual inclination is criticized by Morrison (1995) who states that integration of pre-school age group in the public schools lends itself to drilling than learning through exploration and play. It is actually of very minimal influence to the physical development of the learners and this goes against Stebbing (1999) who suggests that five year olds' lives should be full of play.

The findings also show that the environment was not very conducive to the age of the learners. It further highlighted that the premises had limited play equipment and in most cases the schools with the few play equipment were not age appropriate as they used the grades one to three facilities. This goes against the Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 which suggests that all the play equipment should be as per ratio of children and should also be age appropriate. It can thus be concluded that the playground and play area was not conducive to the all-round development of the learners. Age appropriate activities and materials enable the learners to be independent and explore but this was not being achieved by the ECD B environment under study in Gweru primary schools.

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