

An analysis of the level of specialisation of the current Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers and how well funded the programme is in Gweru urban and peri-urban primary schools

By

¹*Chikutuma Tendai and* ²*Mawere Virginia Hope*

¹Principal Lecturer, Belvedere Technical Teachers' College
tchikutuma@gmail.com/tendaichikutuma@rocketmail.com

²Senior Lecturer Zimbabwe Open University
hopemawere@yahoo.com/vmawere640@gmail.com

Abstract

As the education system develops in Zimbabwe, expectations are made on the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture. The raised expectations demand that education is made accessible to all children including the zero to six year olds. Furthermore, to ascertain quality education, public schools need to have well qualified personnel. It is therefore, the duty of the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture to ensure that the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes are well funded. It was the purpose of this study to establish whether the ECD personnel in the primary schools is well qualified from the time of commencement of the inclusion policy up to the time of this study in 2008. The study revealed that the schools have serious shortage of specialist teachers for ECD A (3-4 year olds) and B (4-5 year olds). The researchers also established that, the programmes depend on the community for funding instead of the state.

1. Background

Prior to the Jomtien Conference of 1990 countries worldwide knew about the need for inclusive provision of Early Childhood Education and Care but were not committed to change the current state of selective access (Hyde and Kabiru, 2003). However, the Jomtien Conference marked a historical moment in the lives of the zero to six year olds. It saw several countries including Zimbabwe signing the protocol of education for all. Quoting the deliberations of the Jomtien conference of 1990, Evans (2002), suggests that the conscientious care of the zero to six year olds leads to investment in the country's future. Thus from the late 1990s the thrust of the Jomtien Conference was that the early years of a child are worth investing into. Weikart (2000) suggests that the early education and care of the three to six year olds offers a smooth transition of preschoolers to primary education. It is therefore, with this realisation of the importance of early education and care that the Jomtien conference participants came up with the decision to put more vigour in ECD education and care provision and thus signing the protocol of education for all including the zero to six year olds.

As a follow up to the signed conventions, the Dakar Conference of 2000 was called to evaluate participant countries' response to the Jomtien Conference deliberations on Early Childhood Education and Care. UNESCO (2005) reports of the Dakar Conference of 2000 in which Zimbabwe participated, saying there is need to improve ECD programmes for zero to six year olds. Zimbabwe has been influenced by these international deliberations, but still up to the time of the study in 2008, the country was flooded by private owned nursery schools/ECD Centres. The choice of ECD programmes was dependent on the fees that were being charged by the private ECD programmes. It is in view of this background that the researchers looked at Zimbabwe's current status in terms of teacher qualification and the adequacy of funding of ECD programmes in Gweru urban and peri-urban schools in Zimbabwe.

The Teaching Approach in ECD

The teaching approach in ECD is informal but not aimless. Faber (1998) states that informal teaching entails a well planned environment providing learners with opportunities for self-discovery. The teacher and the learner are partners in the process with the learners exploring within limits while the teacher plans, presents and gives assistance with the learning opportunities for each individual. Furthermore, the playroom is arranged to encourage socialisation and co-operation among learners. For example, in the researchers' observations of ECD learners at school, they realised that when painting or drawing the children discussed their art processes and productions. For the ECD teacher to be effective, s/he needs to have a thorough knowledge of the learners' interests and needs (Hyde and Kabiru, 2003). The learning environment also needs to be flexible. It is in line with this literature on the need for specialisation skills, ability to bring across the informal curriculum, qualification and quest to ascertain teacher competence that the researchers wished to observe the teachers at work in ECD classes in the Gweru primary schools.

Early Childhood Development Teacher Education Programme.

Teacher education for ECD teachers in Zimbabwe has seen many reforms since the turn of the twenty first century. UNESCO (2007) pointed out that in an effort to address the challenges brought about by the national development priorities for Education For All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), different countries in Africa were mandated to review their ECD teacher education policies and practices. This procedure would assist different African countries to adopt a holistic approach to meeting both qualitative and quantitative practices associated with teacher development focusing on Models of teacher education, implementation strategies and emerging issues such as HIV and AIDS, Information Communication Technology and Technical and Vocational Education.

According to Verspoor (2004), Teacher Training is a programme that helps teachers to develop values, attitudes, skills and knowledge (VASK) they need to teach competently in their own classrooms. The same author goes on to say Teacher Education is a broader term which refers to formally organized attempts to provide knowledge, skills and dispositions to prospective or experienced teachers. Teacher Education focuses on both Pre-service and In-service preparation of teachers in a variety of ways in bringing about learning. Teacher Education ensures that trainee teachers have (VASK) they need to function effectively in the classroom, ECD Centre/school, community and society and continue to upgrade themselves (Professional development) throughout their career.

Historically, studies indicate that there was no coherent policy on the minimum academic and professional qualification for ECD teachers in Zimbabwe during the colonial era. The required qualification for attending para-professional training, ranged from Grade 7 (Primary School Certificate), to those with Certificate in Pre-School Education or 0'level. This training was done by Non Governmental Organisations, Churches/Missionaries and private individuals. UNESCO (2007) also points out that the duration of the course varied from one month, three months or one year and trainees received a certificate of attendance, Certificate or a Diploma. However, Pugh and Duffy, (2010:200), observe that, "the single biggest fact that determines the quality of child care is the workforce. The current childcare workforce includes many capable and dedicated people. However, qualification levels are generally low. If the system is to develop into one that is among the best quality in the world, a step-change is needed in the quality and stability of the workforce. Working with pre-school children should have as much status as a profession as teaching children in schools.

Therefore, in a bid to improve the ECD programme and build a quality ECD teaching force, in Zimbabwe, all primary teacher's colleges trains ECD as well as Primary school teachers following a 2 terms in college in the first year, 5 terms on teaching practice and 2 terms in college in the final year (2-5-2) model of training teachers. The system is designed to give trainee teachers more time in the teaching field and emphasise on the job training. They end up getting a Diploma In Education (ECD) qualification (UNESCO, 2007). The training is guided by the following policies adopted by the Government of Zimbabwe.

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- .Holistic and inclusive in nature embracing global emerging issues in the curriculum. This means that policy adopted a wider definition of “teachers.”
- .Emphasise Competency and Skills approach to teacher development linked to human capital theory and an expanded vision of human and child rights.
- .Recognition of Capability Approach to teacher development which provides a useful theoretical complement to existing teacher development practices.
- .The realization that education is a basic human right means quality of education depends on the development of quality teachers.
- .To improve teacher quality there is need for support systems through support for sustainable, national in-service teacher education and training.
- .The the tripartite concept of learning 3Cs that is learning as consequences, learning as construction and learning as connection is implemented in the ECD teacher education programmes to ensure production of quality teachers.(UNESC,2007).

The question to address here is are these teachers who have gone through this ECD Teacher Education Programme capable of being effective in practice and are the ECD classrooms/playrooms manned by these qualified teachers.

2. Methodology

The researchers used the descriptive survey methods which involves observing what is seen and describing beyond implied meaning. Patton (2002) suggests 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 three to six year olds in the primary schools and in particular the level of qualification of ECD teachers and the funding status of the programmes. The researchers used observations, interviews and questionnaires.

Observations

As descriptive survey researchers, non participant observations of teachers were made. The non-involvement gave the researchers the opportunity to assess how ECD teachers handled learners (Christians, 2005). The observations enabled the researchers to link teacher specialisation with teacher ability to handle learners effectively in the ECD environment. The researchers were able to check and analyse the funding status of the ECD programme by checking on the equipment and infrastructure. During the observations and the filling in of the checklist, the researchers took note of pertinent issues that needed follow up in interviews and informal conversations. The teachers were interviewed following presentation of children’s activities.

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 ECD children. They provided participants with the opportunity to clearly express their feelings, emotions and perceptions which gave the researchers the opportunity to physically experience the ECD learners and teachers’ environment through participants’ emotional expressions. Interviewees were purposively sampled having targeted all school heads and ECD teachers. The researchers settled for 10 parents/caregivers per school.

Questionnaires

Chiromo (2006) asserts that questionnaires are easy to construct, administer and thus are least expensive. The responses can be obtained from more people in a short space of time. After the teachers were assured that their responses were confidentially treated, they were able to reveal their sentiments about their meager salaries and low qualifications.

3. Data Presentation, Interpretation and Analysis

Data presentation and analysis involves making a careful and systematic identification of similar responses (Patton, 2002). One mainly settles on seeing raw data and thus the researcher gives meaning to data as they appear on the surface. The analysis of data in this study involved identifying different responses from all research instruments that fitted into the same research issues. Through the process of bunching responses the researchers were able to read important information that could be passed on to the readers. Descriptions of teacher qualification and funding of ECD programmes were made. Sometimes participants' important messages were noted indirectly.

Interpretation involves giving meaning to analysed data. The researchers went beyond surface manifestations of data. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) say that interpretation seeks to make sense of data by reaching out for understanding of that raw data, that is by picking out possible implied meaning. Interpretation involved examining data collected through research instruments against the background of the Zimbabwean education policy of inclusion of three to six year olds in the primary schools and the literature reviewed in the study.

4. Findings

ECD an area which is still overwhelmingly female dominated and lowly paid with levels of qualifications vary considerably across the sector with those in maintained setting registering higher levels of pay and qualifications. From all the schools under study, there was no teacher with a Bachelor of ECD. This concurs with Fay Chung in Pence (2004) who says that, as far as ECD is concerned in the Zimbabwean education system, is in virgin land. This therefore gives room for innovative approaches that ensure high quality ECD programmes. While there is shortage of specialised personnel, there is hope for training teachers who can competently handle ECD education and care. The findings also indicate that there are only two teachers out of ten teachers of the five schools under study with a university affiliated diploma. From the researchers' observations, these two teachers showed signs of specialisation as could be seen by their creativeness or improvisation skills in giving and handling classroom activities for ECD learners.

In support of the above finding, the school heads echoed satisfaction towards the two teachers with university affiliated diploma's capability and professionalism. Furthermore, findings revealed that seven out of ten teachers had private and unrecognised certificates in ECD by the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture. From these seven teachers, some started off as temporary teachers and through school heads' initiatives attended staff development courses spearheaded by ECD Education Officers in the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture . The researchers observed that these para-professionals showed a slight understanding of ECD programmes as they have also improvised in terms of procuring play equipment.

The study showed that one of the ten teachers under study was a temporary teacher with experience in teaching older grades. Her engagement to teach in the ECD learners was due to that experience. The observation of teacher activities given by the temporary teacher to the ECD learners showed formal written exercises. This goes against van Staden (2000) who states that the ECD curriculum should be informal and play oriented. In addition the teacher's formalisation of ECD education matches the criticism in Morrison (1995) who says that having three to six year olds in primary lends itself to formalisation of the teaching approaches.

The school head of Blue school whose teacher was temporary when interviewed admitted that the teacher was indeed giving formal activities to ECD learners. This goes against Morrison (1995) who says that the

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classroom environment should be such that the learners experiment and discover. The finding clearly shows that there was no standard measure of teacher qualification in all schools under study.

In line with the funding of ECD programmes, the questionnaire indicated that all teachers under study were not happy with their remuneration. This was a clear indication that the ECD programmes were not well funded in terms of remuneration. Two of the school heads echoed heavily that the implementation of the inclusion policy brought a burden to the schools since they have no space, funds, and qualified personnel. This concurs with literature reviewed by UNESCO (2005) and UNESCO (2007) which state that while the African Governments realise the importance of ECD education and care, they are not prepared to fund it, either because they cannot afford or do not have the necessary commitment to invest funds in ECD education and care programmes.

Findings also revealed that teachers did not have the necessary stationery and could not establish and display the play areas which are a pre-requisite in the ECD play area. To try and curb the shortfall, teachers asked parents to donate toys and stationery but these were still not enough as schools did not have scissors, glue, paint and paste which are the essentials for ECD learners. At Blue School, the administrators over enrolled the ECD learners so as to raise the salary for the ECD teacher.

Findings also revealed that teacher education for ECD teachers is manned by different people and organisations and the duration of these programmes vary. Some respondents said that they attended a three months course and are holders of a certificate. This compromises the quality of the ECD programme. To make matters worse, the researchers' observations revealed that, the ten school heads in the schools visited have no formal qualification in ECD and yet they are the ones who supervise the ECD teachers. The study also revealed that the teachers in charge of the ECD Departments supervise ECD A and B as well as infant classes (Grades 1-3) and yet are trained to teach Infant Classes and thus are not familiar with the learning styles of three to six year olds..

5. Discussion of Findings

The fact that the school heads indicated that the majority of ECD teachers were para-professionals except for the minority was an indication that the teachers were not properly qualified. This may be because the policy was not clear on the standard of teacher qualification. It may also be because the country did not have enough specialised ECD teachers. It was also noticeable from the observers that the exercises given by the para-professionals were not as per expected standards. This may have been because they are not well versed in the ECD area. This situation of teachers not being properly qualified goes against Hyde and Kabiru (2003) who state that highly qualified teachers in Head start programmes led to high academic performance later on in the ECD learners' lives. Results from the study also strongly indicated that the programmes are not well funded. This maybe because the communities are the ones funding them and hence may not afford to fully fund the programmes. The poor funding status was noted for poor effects on the all round development of the learners as noted by Hyde and Kabiru (2003).

6. Conclusion

In view of the issue on how well trained the ECD teachers are, findings indicate that the majority of the teachers are not highly qualified. Therefore, it can be concluded that the ECD teachers are not well trained. Furthermore, results show that schools are struggling to sustain ECD programmes and thus it can be concluded that ECD programmes are not well funded. All school heads under study unanimously suggested that the Government could improve the funding of ECD programmes by giving higher grants than are normally given to primary school children.

7. Recommendations

The above discussion indicates that ECD teacher education in Zimbabwe still has different organizations including the government. However, these organizations implement differences in models of teacher education in an endeavour to achieve equity and quality in the education and care of young children. We also observed that the emphasis on pre-service teacher programmes emphasises skills acquisition at the expense of professional development. There is need to make programmes appropriate, relevant and workable and to avoid 'the once and for all' notion of training. Teacher education need to be viewed as preparation and professional development that begins with pre-service and continues as a process of ongoing lifelong learning throughout a teachers career.

There is also need to rationalise and clarify standard qualifications for ECD teachers as a continuing priority. National Standards will ensure that all ECD personnel cover the same range of standards of knowledge and practice and these be reviewed regularly to keep pace with change in the sector. All ECD teachers and managers need to have relevant qualifications with professional competence and management skills. The State needs to revisit the ECD teacher education policy so that it focuses on some of the key issues such as:

- What is the ideal model of training and its duration?
- The teacher education curriculum content.
- Criterion and selection methods used to admit teachers into colleges.
- Teacher monitoring and supervision while on teaching practice.
- How to improve quality of trainers working in teachers' colleges and universities.
- Improve incentives of qualified ECD personnel in order to attract them to work in State owned ECD centers.
- Allocate reasonable resources for teachers to use in ECD classrooms.

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