



Blending Early Childhood Education with Ethic of Care: a Case of Two Church-run Pre-Schools in Kabwe, Zambia

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Abstract: *This study focused on the blending of Childhood Education with an ethic of care at two pre-schools run by churches in the Kabwe district of Zambia. An ethic of care is vital in instituting dialogue between educators and learners, which ensures a conducive learning environment. Methodically, descriptive techniques of the qualitative strategy were used to draw upon seventeen (17) participant interviews that were conducted in two purposively selected pre-schools and two Focus Group Discussions. Participants were selected by recommendation of school administrators. Pieces of evidence were also availed from related secondary data. Thematic analysis was used to interpret data from the aforementioned sources. Names of participants and other units of analyses were referred to codes of their schools and, therefore, withheld anonymously. The findings of the study were that not all preschool educators had appropriate training in handling learners at the pre-grade level. As such the untrained educators represented by 33% of the respondents seemed to lack sufficient skills and competencies needed for the caring learning environment. The study recommends the promotion, by the Zambian education system, of an ethic of care as part of the pedagogical content knowledge in the training of Early Childhood Educators and the employment, by preschool proprietors, of trained personnel with skills and competencies specifically for handling learners in the critical age range of 0 to 8 years.*

Keywords: *Early childhood, preschool, Ethic of care, Kabwe, Nkrumah.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the blending of childhood education with care giving, a case study conducted at two pre-schools run by churches. The two pre-schools namely *Honeyview* and *Golden Laurels* (pseudonyms) respectively, which served as study areas, are both located within the Kabwe district. *Honeyview* Pre-School is located in an urban area while *Golden Laurels* is in a rural area.

Every stage of a child's successful development in education relies on the pre-primary education foundation. Early childhood education is a broad term used to describe the education programmes of children in their pre-school years before they are old enough to enter grade one or elementary school. Early childhood education (ECE) is, therefore, important because it is a stage in which a child acquires basic language and numeric skills while contributing to a child's fundamental foundation for cognitive, social, moral, physical, spiritual, and personality development. The period from birth to eight years old is one of the remarkable brain developments for children and represents a crucial window of opportunity for education. It is believed that early childhood care and education (ECCE) can be the foundation for emotional well-being and learning throughout life and one of the best investments a country can make as it promotes holistic development, gender equality, and social cohesion. The phenomenological analysis of caring reveals the part each participant plays. The one-caring (or caregiver) is first of all attentive. This attention, which is called "engrossment" in *Caring* (Noddings, 1984; Noddings, 2005), is receptive; it receives what the cared-for is feeling and trying to express. In a caring relationship or encounter, the cared-for recognises the caring and responds in some detectable manner. An infant smiles and wriggles in response to its mother's care giving. A student may acknowledge her teacher's caring directly, with verbal gratitude, or simply pursue her project more confidently. The receptive teacher can see that her caring has been received by monitoring her students' responses. Without an affirmative response from the cared-for, we cannot call an encounter or relation caring.

The study considers the blending of the ethic of care in teaching at pre-school as crucial considering the age bracket of learners at this level, and therefore an investigation into the same is necessary in planning and working towards guaranteeing a conducive environment for learning to take place.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The importance of the role and caring of educators for the learners at the pre-school level of education is not something that is obviously known and taken seriously by many educationists. This oversight, in the view of the researchers, is crucial. In Kabwe, to be specific, the blending of the ethic of care in teaching at two pre-schools namely *Honeyview* and *Golden Laurels* (*pseudonyms*) was not known. It was, therefore, felt that without addressing the importance of an ethic of care as one of the factors that constitute an ideal learning environment in early childhood education, the efforts in ensuring development at the two pre-schools would be rendered incomplete. This necessitated the inquiry by the current study, with the hope that the findings would also provide empirical references to the entire educational sector in Zambia.

1.3. Aim of the Study

The general aim of the study was to investigate the blending of the ethic of care in teaching at the two selected pre-schools in Kabwe District.

Specific objectives were:

- a) To find out whether the personnel at the two pre-schools were trained to handle the preschool learners.
- b) To establish whether the employees and preschool proprietors at the sample schools were acquainted with the ethic of care knowledge.
- c) To evaluate whether the educators at the two schools were able to demonstrate the knowledge of the ethic of care and whether they exhibited its attributes at work.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND BRIEF REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Early Childhood Education (ECE), also known as nursery education, is a branch of education theory that relates to the teaching of children (formally or informally). It refers to the period between birth and 8 years of age, wherein a child's brain is highly sensitive to the environment around them. This is a time of remarkable growth that requires a specialised educational approach to ensure that children learn key skills and foundational concepts to prepare them for life. Traditionally, this is up to the equivalent of third grade.

Theoretically, the study is premised on one of the Early Childhood theories known as Noddings' theory of ethical care.

2.1. Noddings' Theory of Ethic Care

In his theory, Noddings (1984) contends that caring should be at the heart of the education system. This concept serves as the foundation for the theoretical framework of the ethic of care in education. This innately feminist framework emphasises the difference between the traditional male-dominated view about rules, regulations, and abstract thinking, and the more feminine, "motherly" voice of context that seeks connection and relationship in interaction and decision-making.

2.2. Defining Care

The term "care" has been described by Martin Heidegger (1926/1962), a German philosopher, as the very being of life, while Milton Mayeroff (1971) notes that to care for other persons is to help them care for themselves. Gordon, Benner, and Noddings (1996: xiii) define caring as "a set of relational practices that foster mutual recognition and realisation, growth, development, protection, empowerment, and human community, culture, and possibility". This definition emphasises that caring occurs within relationships.

2.3. The One Caring and the Cared For

The basic assumption of Noddings's (1992) ethic of care is the reciprocal relationship between the "one caring" and the "cared for." In an educational setting, the teacher assumes the role of the one caring while the students are those cared for. In this relationship, the one-caring (teacher) feels an obligation and a sense of "I must" in establishing the caring ethic. Noddings further contend that teachers who profess an ethic of care in their practice view themselves as the ones responsible for empowering their students. The caring ethic suggests that teachers approach student needs from the subjective perspective of "I must do something" rather than the more objective "something must be done" approach. Teachers are motivated by this philosophy to perform conscious acts of "being with" and "doing for" for the sake of their students. This is in contrast to leaving student care up to others and removing themselves from personal responsibility. Several characteristics of both the one-caring teacher and the cared-for student are required to facilitate the ethic of care relationship (Noddings, 1992).

2.4. Enacting Care in Teaching

The study conducted by Owens & Ennis (2005) to review theoretical frameworks that relate to teachers who manifest an ethic of care offers many revelations pertinent to this study, particularly on the need to endorse an ethic of care in teaching. The duo contends that the ability to endorse an ethic of care in teaching should be an expectation of effective teachers. Teachers need to be able to care for themselves, their students, the content, and other members of the school community. Too often, that ability to care is assumed rather than nurtured or taught. In most cases, physical education teachers can care only for those students who are willing to learn or are athletes. The need exists to better prepare future teachers and assist current teachers in understanding the ethic of care.

Current teacher education programs and professional development programs often fail to address the ethic of care and its impact on the educational process. While many teachers say they care about students, without a true understanding of what this means, teachers may become overwhelmed by the realities of care. Therefore, it is suggested that the ethic of care become pedagogical content knowledge and part of the teacher training curriculum. The ethic of care represents a relatively recent field of study in education. Noddings's (1984) groundbreaking philosophical work describing this theory has led other researchers to conduct their inquiry as they attempt to confirm and expand Noddings's theory. Findings have supported and expanded the ethic of care as an instrumental yet complicated construct in understanding educational settings. Given the complexity of the ethic of care construct, this article should serve to lead the reader to a better understanding of the ethic of care.

2.5. Early Childhood

Early childhood education focuses on critical developmental milestones, skills, and concepts that children attain during their childhood, from social-emotional skills to the beginnings of numeracy, literacy, and critical thinking. In addition to preparing children for future academic success, the development of high-quality early childhood care and education is considered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (henceforth OECD) to be a key economic indicator when assessing the health and future positioning of a nation. Furthermore, UNESCO supports high-quality early childhood education as one of its sustainable development goals. This foundational aspect of education directly contributes to better lives for children, which resounds through national improvements to prosperity, social inclusion, and economic development (<http://www.asparis.org/blog/details/board/academics/early-childhood-education>).

2.6. Early Childhood Educators

Early Childhood Educators lead children in activities to stimulate and develop their intellectual, physical, and emotional growth and ensure their security and well-being. Early childhood educators and assistants are employed in child-care centres, day care centres, kindergartens, agencies for exceptional children, and other settings where early childhood education services are provided. Supervisors of early childhood educators and assistants are included in this unit group (*National Occupational Classification, Canada, 2023*).

In terms of training, what early childhood educators require are (i) completion of a two to four years college programme in early childhood education, or, a “bachelor’s” degree in child development, and (ii) licensing by an appropriate educational or vocational agency, is usually required. As for the early childhood Educator Assistants, a completion of Secondary School, experience in childcare and completion of Early Childhood certificate programmes or post-Secondary courses in early childhood education may be required. Just like the early childhood educators, licensing by an appropriate agency for educator assistants is also required (*ibid*).

2.7. Summary

In summary, the literature reviewed demonstrates that Early Childhood Education focuses on the developmental milestone of children in the age bracket of between birth to 8 years and that caring for learners during this critical period of growth should be at the heart of the education system. The literature review has further demonstrated that care, in the context of “rational practices” intended to foster the mutual realisation of growth, development, empowerment, and so on, among learners, is quite an essential ingredient in teaching children. We are also informed by scholars that for effective teaching to take place, Early Childhood Education needs to endorse an ethic of care and that there is a need for a reciprocal relationship between the one caring (teacher) and those cared for (learners). Last, but not least, scholars have stressed the importance of training early childhood educators and assistants, as paramount in the education of children in the age bracket of 0 – 8 years.

3. METHODOLOGY

Methodically, the study used descriptive techniques of the qualitative strategy. This was considered appropriate since the study was essentially descriptive, in the sense that it aimed to discover answers to underlying questions by attempting to describe and define the problem (Blumberg, 2014). Seventeen (17) participant interviews were conducted in two school subsamples in the Kabwe district. The schools selected included one rural and one urban. Interview participants from the subsamples were selected purposively, by recommendation of school administrators as pre-school teachers, children Assistant personnel, parent representative, or school proprietor. The study followed the literature review method to provide pieces of evidence from the available secondary sources of data that were accessed in the literature related to the study. The research used thematic analysis to interpret data from the aforementioned sources. Here non-numerical methods were used and the recording and analysis of information gathered were preceded by designing a special “path of analysis” (or simply a description) where data coding was involved. The coding followed an “inductive approach” which involved the classification of information at the end of data collection. No complicated calculations were required in this approach, but the making of inferences was involved and this was purely logical and entirely the researchers’ task (*Bogdan and Biklen, 1982*). Names of participants and other units of analyses were referred to codes of their schools and, therefore, withheld anonymously or referred to using pseudonyms.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study draws upon a total of 17 respondents from whom seventy-one percent (71%) were females and 29% males. In terms of the highest levels of educational attainment, eighty-six percent (86%) had attained tertiary level while the fourteen (14%) had only gone up to primary level. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents said they had only worked for less than a year at the pre-schools they were found at the time of interviews and only 28% said they had been at their current stations for more than five years. The majority, forty-eight (48%) said they had served as pre-school teachers for periods ranging from 2 to 5 years.

Amongst these respondents, fifty-three percent (53%) said they had handled pre-grade classes while twelve percent (12%) of the respondents taught grades 1, 2, and 3. Parents and proprietors of the pre-schools constituted 24% and 12% respectively. The table below summaries the composition of respondents by roles played in the two pre-schools:

Table1. *Composition of Respondents by Roles Played in Schools*

Category	Numbers	Per Cent
Pre-grade Teachers	09	53
Lower Primary Teachers	02	12
Parents	04	23
Proprietors	02	12
Total	17	100

Source: *Field data*

The research was also concerned with finding out the extent to which the Early Childhood Educators at two sample schools were trained, to qualify them for the roles they assumed. The table below shows the summary of the responses:

Table2. *Early Childhood Educators Training*

CATEGORY	TOTAL NUMBER	TRAINED		UNTRAINED	
		No.	%	No.	%
Early Childhood Educators (Teachers)	09	06	66	03	33
Early Childhood Assistants	02	00	00	02	100
Pre-School Proprietors	02	01	50	01	50
Total	13	07	54	06	46

Source: *Field data*

As can be seen from the table above, the percentage of trained personnel among early childhood educators at the two pre-schools was 66% while 33% were untrained. None of the two Assistants employed at the two schools, respectively, had received any training in early childhood education, while among the school proprietors, only one was trained.

Studies conducted elsewhere by scholars (National Occupational Classification, Canada, 2023) have emphasised the need for training of Early Childhood Educators. In this case, 33% of untrained personnel were most likely not acquainted with the ethic of care knowledge which could have been part of what constituted the content of the training pedagogy.

The study was also interested in finding out whether teachers at the two sample schools were able to express caring attributes to learners, regardless of whether they (teachers) were trained or not. It was found that 72% of the teachers provided academic care to learners in the form of remedial work/ homework and career talks. Among the extra care given to learners were those that were directed to pupils' ailment-related problems (health issues). The majority of the respondents in the current study indicated sentiments that were in context with the following remarks from one teacher:

Apart from giving slow learners remedial work, I engage the parents of those pupils who present with health-related ailments such as HIV/AIDS. Through the help of the school management, I facilitate food and nutritional supply for those in need, to enhance their concentration in class (Interview with a female teacher at Honey View Pre-School, March 18, 2023)

These characteristics of the caring process are consistent with some of those cited by Tarlow (1996) in his study, such as "providing time", "being there", and "talking" (dialogue).

However, 14% of the respondents expressed reservations about the idea of blending the ethic of care with teaching. One respondent said:

I fear risking myself in providing services in areas outside my expertise, such as attending to pupils who present with certain ailments (Interview with a male teacher at Golden Laurels Pre-School, March 27, 2023)

Probing further as to whether the above interviewee had undergone any training in teaching or handling Early Childhood learners, he responded in the negative. This, and similar views that came from respondents because they were not acquainted with the need to incorporate the ethic of care in the education of young learners due to any reason, whether it was lack of training, point to the need not only to emphasise the component of the ethic of care in the training of pre-school teacher pedagogy but also to encourage proprietors of these institutions to employ trained Early childhood Educators and Child Assistants.

The rural school in this case had a slightly higher number of untrained educators (66% of the untrained total) among which was the proprietor, who also served as a teacher due to a shortage of manpower.

Scholars (Owen & Ennis, 2005; Noddings, 1992; Mayeroff, 1970) have observed that blending early childhood education with an ethic of care is a good package in the sense that it serves as an important element in the preparatory phase for entry into primary school. They have further observed that it helps children develop holistically as they respond in some detectable manner. This could be one of the benefits that could be realised from the two sample schools in Kabwe where it was found that the 33% of the personnel who served the young learners were not trained teachers to be expected of understanding a good deal of the basics of caring ethics.

Through the analysing the findings of the current study from a comparative point of view between the two sample schools, it can be deduced that even though the introduction of early childhood education in Zambia was a good move in the very sense that it availed an education opportunity for all Zambian children in the age bracket of 0 to 8 years, only a small percentage of the Zambian children population seem to reap the benefit of this programme. These are children mostly from affluent areas. Worthy as the move was, the blending of an ethic of care and education in government schools seems to face various challenges. The results of the survey that was conducted by the Ministry of Education indicated a failure to attain the targeted 30 percent preschool attendance by all eligible children in Zambia by the year 2015, citing poor enrolment and retention rates (Munsaka & Matafwali, 2013), such emerging challenging issues as revealed by the current study and deserve priority attention.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to investigate the blending of Early Childhood Education with the ethic of care at two pre-schools in the Kabwe district of Zambia. Noddings's (1984) theory of Ethic of Care was used to provide a framework for analysing and offering explanations for relative phenomena expected of an ideal environment for early childhood education to take place. For example, the teachers' need for self-development, establishing caring relationships with their students; providing a caring environment for learning and the need for creating relationships with students so that they feel cared for; and in turn, learners to care for themselves and each other.

From the highlights of the findings in the current study it is apparent that the application of the Noddings theory at the two sample pre-schools in Kabwe, by and large, seems not to have been effective. This is based on the study's explanations of the related phenomena as obtained from the findings. For instance, the study revealed that not all preschool educators at the two schools had appropriate training in handling learners at the pre-grade level. The 33% of the untrained respondents seemed to lack sufficient skills and competencies needed for the caring learning environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the current study, the authors recommend the following:

- The Education system in Zambia should emphasise the aspect of an ethic of care as part of the pedagogical content knowledge in the training of Early Childhood Educators.
- Proprietors of pre-schools in Zambia should ensure that they employ qualified personnel (teachers and educator assistants) who are appropriately trained and certified, with competencies and skills specifically for handling learners in the critical age range of 0 to 8 years.

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