

# The Impact of the Early Childhood Development (Ecd) Program: A Case Study of Mutoko District in Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe

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**Abstract:** This study sets out to examine the extent to which the policy on Early childhood development is being implemented in Zimbabwean primary schools. The study employed the quantitative methodology, which is guided by the positivism philosophy. It adopted the descriptive survey design. The target population included all heads and infant teachers in Mutoko District which has eighty-nine primary schools. The sample consisted of 120 respondents who were made up of 100 females and 20 males. All the data were collected through a questionnaire which had both close-ended and open-ended questions. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret the data. The study revealed that most of the schools did not have ECD trained teachers. It also revealed a high number of the schools did not have the standard play centres. The study also revealed that both teachers and heads viewed the policy on early childhood development programmers positively but were worried by the weak implementation structures. The study recommends that procurement of ECD materials and provision of qualified personnel should be prioritized.

**Keywords:** Child development, district, infants, pre-school, basic education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Science shows that life is a story for which the beginning sets the tone. That makes the early years of childhood a time of great opportunity, but also great risk. Children's brains are built, moment by moment, as they interact with their environments. In the first few years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed each second a pace never repeated again. The quality of a child's early experiences makes a critical difference as their brains develop, providing either strong or weak foundations for learning, health and behaviour throughout life (Currie 2012).

Child development that occurs from birth to adulthood was largely ignored throughout much of history. Children were often viewed simply as small versions of adults and little attention was paid to their cognitive abilities, language usage and physical growth (Currie 2012). According to Shapiro and Nager (2019) early childhood education is a branch of educational theory which relates to the teaching of young children up until the age of about eight years, with a particular focus on education. Early care must emphasise links to family, home culture, and home language by uniquely caring for each child (Pence, 2014). As Morrison (2008) observes, many psychologists believe that early childhood education can significantly affect a person's ability to deal successfully with later life. In Zimbabwe early childhood development programmers (ECD) cater for the earlier years of primary or elementary education (Taylor, 2009). The Nziramasanga Commission set up by Zimbabwe's President in 1999 recommended a nine-year Compulsory Basic Education (Muzenda, 2011). Thus, every child should undergo a nine-year primary course. The first year would be Early Childhood Development (ECD) A and (ECD) B in every primary school. In Zimbabwe universal early childhood education is a relatively new phenomenon. According to Nziramasanga (1999) early childhood used to cater mainly for white children before independence. The concept of ECD (A) and (B) classes was necessitated by the need to avail pre-school education to all children in Zimbabwe as recommended by the 1999 Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education (Nziramasanga 1999). In pursuit of this goal, a policy decision was taken by the Ministry of Education Sport and Culture (MOESC) as reflected in

the Secretary's Circular Number 14 of 2004 for all primary schools to attach two ECD classes (Grades A and B) in phases with effect from 2005 (Muzenda, 2011).

Accordingly, the class of 3-4 year olds will be known as ECD (A) and the class of 34-5 year olds will be known as ECD (B). Although it is mandatory for all primary schools to implement the ECD programmer, the present writes assumed that conditions in most primary schools, particularly in rural areas might negate the noble intentions of this policy. Regardless such as Zingler (2011), Shelton and Trudge (2010), Wenner (2009) Schnur (2010) among others have found long-term benefits of pre-schooling such as better attachment and commitment to school, more social and cognitive development, more positive achievement orientation, less delinquency and more school enjoyment. As Curried (2012) observes early childhood would appear to promote better social and cognitive functioning that result in smoother transition to formal schooling. It is on account of this information that this study set out to explore the impact of the early childhood development programmer in the primary school system in Zimbabwean schools with particular focus on Gomadoda Cluster, Nkayi District in Matabeleland North.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

The introduction of Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme is a relatively new phenomenon. The concept of ECD (A) and (B) classes was necessitated by the need to avail pre-school education to all children in Zimbabwe without discrimination. This study therefore sought to specifically assess the impact of the ECD programme in Zimbabwean schools.

### **1.2. Purpose of the Study**

The study sought to investigate the implementation modalities of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmer in the Zimbabwean primary schools so as to highlight both the positive and negative effects of the policy. The study also sought to come up with suggestions for the improvement of the programmer.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

How are schools implementing the ECD programmer?

What are heads and teachers' attributes towards the ECD programmer?

What are the challenges associated with the ECD programmer?

What improvements can be effected on the current ECD programmer in Zimbabwean schools?

### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

The importance of the study is premised on the fact that it sought to reveal issues concerning the implementation of the Early Childhood Development Programme. It was hoped that the views and recommendations put forward could help supervisors to better understand the programme and be in a position to assist and direct the teachers as they carry out their duties with the young children. It was also hoped that the study would proffer possible suggestions to help the implementation of the ECD programme through changing attitudes of all the key stakeholders within the school system.

### **1.5. Limitations of the Study**

In view of the small size of the sample and sub-samples used, the findings of this study, therefore, would have limited generalizability. The findings may only apply to rural schools and not urban contexts since rural and urban contexts are generally different in most respects in Zimbabwean schools. It has to be pointed out also that perceptions about issues are essentially subjective and cannot be measured accurately.

### **1.6. Delimitations of the Study**

The study was confined to one cluster in Mutoko District in Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe. A district in Zimbabwe is an educational administrative structure within the ten provinces of the country. The district is headed by the Schools' Inspector who is the chief executive of all the schools within the district. The respondents were teachers and heads of schools. Members of the School Development Committees, parents and Education Inspectors were outside the purview of this

study. The study was concerned with the way how schools implement the Early Childhood Development programme as promulgated by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, in 2004.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to (Hoffman, 2010) early childhood encompasses the period of human development from the prenatal stage through the transition into the early primary grades. As (Van der Gaag, 2012) stresses, during the children's early years there are four main critical domains of development; which are physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional. Therefore, ECD links the young child's cognitive, emotional, social and physical processes with the care and services provided by the schools to support the children's development (Bandy, Donald 2009).

The benefits of supporting ECD include improved cognitive development, greater educational success and increased productivity in life (Young, 2008). Pence (2004) argues that the skills developed in early childhood form the basis for future learning and labor market success, and the failure to develop these skills can negatively affect educational attainment and productivity and earning potential. Without access to quality ECD, poor children often fall behind their more advantages peers before they even begin school. As they get older, the gaps widen: they are likely to perform poorly in school, earn less as adults and engage in risky social behaviors (Hoffman, 2010). Young (2008) found that ECD investments have a positive impact on older girls and women. In addition to the direct impact of ECD interventions on young children, positive externalities can occur in the areas of girls' education and women's labor force participation rate (Freitas, Shelton and Tulge, 2008).

School readiness of children is affected by a number of factors, including cognitive skills, physical, mental and emotional health, as well as their ability to relate to others (Young 2008). Research also indicates that cognitive abilities are strongly affected by the quality of the environment and amount of stimulation and learning opportunities children are exposed to from birth (Hoverman and Wolfe, 2009). On the other hand, Duncan, Brooks-Gunn (1994) found that access to quality ECD interventions can improve education outcomes by reducing repetition and drop-out rates, improving learning outcomes, and increasing school achievement.

In Zimbabwe, Chikutuma and Mawere (2013) found that the Early Childhood Development inclusion in the primary schools was not quite viable as it failed to cater for the all-round development of learners. For example, age appropriate equipment were not available and appropriate activities were not being administered and that the environment itself was not conducive to the age groups' needs of learning through play (Chikutuma and Mawire 2013). Taruvinga, Mushoriwa, Hannah and Muzembe (2011) found that a number of schools in lack of qualified personnel, lack of knowledge and as a result most of the teachers had negative attitudes towards the introduction of the ECD (A) and (B) classes.

On a positive note, research elsewhere indicates that many parents are willing to invest in pre-school education for various reasons such as preparing their children for the demands of formal schooling (Pagarri et al. 2003; and Freitas, Shelton and Trudge, 2003); finding somewhere to leave their children while they go to work (Hoffman 2010 and Pagari et al. 1997); and the thinking that children without this early preparation are more at risk for academic failure (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn and Klebanow, 1994 and Wenner, 2009). While the above findings are situation specific, they appear not to be tailored to settings ECD teaching in primary schools of in Gomadoda Circuit, Nkayi District in Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe. Such a discrepancy necessitates the conduct of this study in order to ascertain the extent to which such observations could be generalised to settings ECD teaching in primary schools of in Gomadoda Circuit, Nkayi District, Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study employed the quantitative methodology. Quantitative methodology was chosen for its ability to enable this study's findings to be generalized to other districts (Ary and Razaviah, 2010). The quantitative methodology was also found to be useful because it enabled the researcher to investigate some teachers' and heads' perceptions on the Early Childhood Development program.

The study settled for the descriptive research design. The population comprised of 110 infant teachers and 10 heads of schools. The simple random sampling was used to come up with a sample of 120 respondents because it permitted every member to have an equal chance of participating in the study (Blumberg, 2008). The researcher used a questionnaire which largely had closed ended questions and two open-ended questions. Close-ended questions enabled the researcher to collect pre-determined respondents' opinions regarding the studied phenomena (Anderson, 2011). The researcher was able to get the actual situation on the ground regarding the implementation of the ECD programme in the cluster from the respondents' open-ended responses.

#### **4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire which was largely made up of close-ended questions and few open ended questions. The questionnaire was chosen as Cohen and Manion (2009) observe because it has the ability to reach many respondents who live at widely dispersed addresses and preserves anonymity which encourages greater honesty. However, Ary and Razaviah (2010) argue that the questionnaire generally has a low response rate and is inflexible in that it does not allow ideas or comments to be explored in-depth and many questions may remain unanswered. The researcher personally distributed the questionnaire to the schools where the respondents worked. The same method was used to collect the completed questionnaires. Data generated through the questionnaire produced descriptive statistics around the variables under study. These statistics were computed and inferential implications from them derived.

#### **5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study set out to explore the impact of the policy of Early Childhood Development programmes in Zimbabwean primary schools. This section is presented in two parts, namely presentation of data and discussion. Presentation of data

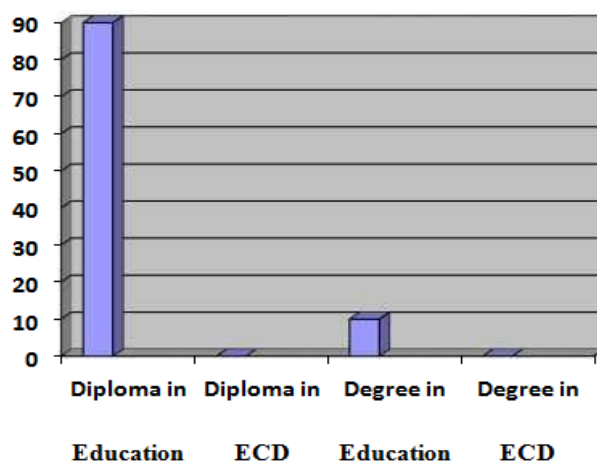
**Table1.** *Composition of sample by gender: (N=110)*

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	20	17
Female	100	83
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 above shows the distribution of respondents by sex. It shows that the overwhelming majority of the respondents were female heads and teachers. The datum was considered statistically significant to the extent that it confirmed that there are more female teachers in the infant departments in most Zimbabwean schools.

**Table2.** *Composition of respondents by approximate age (N=120)*

<b>Age in years</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Below 30	60	50
31 – 40	40	33
41 – 50	12	10
50 and above	8	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>



**Figure1.** Professional qualifications of respondents (N=120)

Figure 1 above shows that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (90%) were in possession of the general diploma in primary education. None of the respondents were in possession of the ECD diploma. Another 10% were in possession of the General bachelor of Education degree.

The majority of the respondents (83%) were forty years and below. Those above forty years of age constituted 17% of the sample. The significance of this statistic is that the majority of respondents still has more years in service; and therefore, can be inducted on the ECD program.

**Table3.** Responses of heads and teachers to the question: “Who should teach the ECD classes?” (N=120)

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Any qualified teacher	20	17
ECD specialists	96	80
Even temporary teachers	4	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 above indicates that the majority of the respondents (80%) felt that only ECD specialists should teach the ECD classes.

**Table4.** Responses of heads and teachers on relevancy of ECD curriculum (N=120)

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Relevant	84	70
Not relevant	4	3.27
Not sure	32	
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

A significant number of respondents (70%) thought that the current ECD curriculum was relevant. Another 27% were not sure about the relevance of the curriculum. This implies that their knowledge of ECD curricula are inadequate. Only 3% felt that it was not relevant.

**Table5.** Responses of heads and teachers to the question: “The ECD program should be compulsory for every child” (N=120)

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	108	90.3
No	4	7
Not sure	8	
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

The table above reveals that the majority of respondents (90%) believe that every child should have access to the ECD program.

**Table6.** Responses of heads and teachers to the question: “Teaching and learning materials are adequately available for the ECD classes” (N=120)

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Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	0	0
No	120	100
Not sure	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 6 reveals that all the respondents (100%) felt that teaching and learning materials were not adequate for use in the ECD program implementation.

The questionnaire had two open-ended questions which bolstered data from the close-ended questions. The first sought to find out from both teachers and heads whether they noticed any changes between the performance of children who went into Grade One without doing the ECD programme and those who went through the programme. The majority of the respondents felt that those who went through the ECD programme were much ready for formal school than those who did not.

The second question sought to find out from the respondents on whether the ECD programme should be left to private providers only. All the respondents (100%) felt that it should not be left to private providers, but should be provided by public schools as per the policy stipulation. Information from the study reveals that none of the respondents in the study were in possession of an ECD qualification. This kind of information tallies with findings by Taruvinga, Mushoriwa, Hannah and Muzembe (2011) who found that a number of schools in Zimbabwe were grappling with problems of lack of qualified personnel, lack of knowledge about what to teach and lack of motivation. As current researchers, we are content that the level of competency of the respondents in the teaching of ECD classes leaves a lot to be desired. The respondents do not know how to teach ECD learners effectively. Consequent upon this observation, ECD learners are bound not to be taught to learn how to learn effectively by teachers who lack the capacity to teach ECD classes.

Findings also reveal that respondents felt that ECD classes should be taught by specialist teachers. The results are comparable with earlier observations by Taruvinga, Mushoriwa, Hannah and Muzembe (2011) who found that a number of schools in lack of qualified personnel, lack of knowledge and as a result most of the teachers had negative attitudes towards the introduction of the ECD (A) and (B) classes. They felt that this was a unique area which should not be given to any teacher but those who were trained specifically to handle these small children. As present researchers, we hold the opinion that ECD teachers are capacitated to teach ECD pupils well. They are trained to give their very big hearts to every learner in a bid to cater for the principle of individuality in the quality teaching and learning process.

The study also shows that the majority of the respondents were quite satisfied with the curriculum they indicated that it was relevant. However, significant to note too is that a sizeable number of teachers teaching the ECD programme were not sure about how the curriculum should look like. This observation is in tandem with Chikutuma and Mawere (2013) who found that the Early Childhood Development inclusion in the primary schools was not quite viable as it failed to cater for the all-round development of learners. For example, age appropriate equipment were not available and appropriate activities were not being administered and that the environment itself was not conducive to the age groups' needs of learning through play (Chikutuma and Mawire 2013). As present researchers, we are of the opinion that the respondents need an exposure to ECD curriculum through in-service teacher education program at teachers' colleges, regional/district/circuit and school-based workshops on ECD if ever they are going to be real and true ECD teachers.

Findings also reveal that the majority of the respondents indicated that the ECD program should be compulsory for all children before they attend formal school lessons. This is in tandem with Young's (2008) observation that the benefits of supporting ECD include improved cognitive development, greater educational success and increased productivity in life. On the same wavelength, Pence (2004) argues that without access to quality ECD, poor children often fall behind their more advantaged peers before they even begin school. The current researchers concur with the preceding early research findings on the grounds that ECD provides pupils with a firm background for formal learning. In other words, ECD ensures that pupils will be maturational ready to undertake formal learning with minimal challenges. The current researchers' opinions are consistent with previous research findings by as

Zingler (2011), Shelton and Trudge (2010), Wenner (2009) Schnur (2010) among others have found long-term benefits of pre-schooling such as better attachment and commitment to school, more social and cognitive development, more positive achievement orientation, less delinquency and more school enjoyment. To further buttress the preceding argument, Curried (2012) observes early childhood would appear to promote better social and cognitive functioning that result in smoother transition to formal schooling.

The study also revealed that all the schools did not have adequate learning and teaching resources for the ECD classes. This means that the children are profoundly disadvantaged as they require a conducive environment. As Hoverman and Wolfe (2009) posit, cognitive abilities of young children are affected by the quality of the environment and amount of stimulation and learning opportunities they are exposed to as they grow up. In the light of the preceding scenario, the current researchers' line of thought is that lack of adequate learning and teaching resources undermines ECD learners' capacities to learn how to learn properly. They are bound to fail to master concepts in language development, fine motor skills development, number development, aesthetic development and movement and music development. This underscored by Morrison (2008) observes, many psychologists believe that early childhood education can significantly affect a person's ability to deal successfully with later life. Therefore, in Zimbabwe early childhood development programmes (ECD) cater for the earlier years of primary or elementary education (Taylor 2009) as preparation for further education namely, primary and secondary school education systems.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

Given the background of the above findings, the researcher makes the following conclusions: There are no teachers qualified to teach children in the Early Childhood Development classes. Most heads and teachers felt that the curriculum currently offered to the ECD classes was relevant. Teachers and heads allude to the fact that ECD classes should be given to qualified specialist teachers in this area. Heads and teachers wanted the provision of ECD lessons to be compulsory for all children before they enroll for Grade One. All schools did not have adequate learning and teaching resources for ECD classes. Most Grade One teachers felt that there was a huge gap in terms of readiness for formal school between those children who attended ECD classes and those who did not. Those who attended were very easy to work with.

Provision of ECD program should be the responsibility of the Government through schools and not left in the hands of private providers.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Having reached the conclusion based on the results of this study, the researchers pen these recommendations.

The Government should expedite the training of more ECD programme teachers in colleges so that they are deployed in all the primary schools across the country.

In the interim, those teachers currently handling ECD classes should be staff developed so that they provide relevant guidance to the children under their custody.

Attending ECD classes should be compulsory for all children before they enroll for Grade One as this prepares them for formal school work.

The Government should as a matter of urgency ensure that the provision of teaching and learning materials like books, equipment, play centres is prioritized in all the primary schools.

Provision of ECD programmes should not be left solely in the hands of private providers but should be taken over by the Ministry of Education stipulates.

School Development Committees should be encouraged to fundraise and generate funds for the construction of play centres in their schools.

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**Citation:** Masimba Takaendesa. " The Impact of the Early Childhood Development (Ecd) Program: A Case Study of Mutoko District in Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe" *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, vol 11, no. 3, 2024, pp. 34-41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.1103005>.

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