

Adding Value to Early Childhood CRITICAL FACTORS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: POLICY AND PRACTICE

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This conceptual paper discusses critical factors in early childhood education. What are herein referred to as critical factors are multidisciplinary in nature. Thus a generic definition does not exist. The paper has endeavoured to provide a framework in which to understand and educate ourselves (practitioners & policy makers) in early education. It further proposes practices which should be used to improve young children's capacity to develop and learn at their own pace. The paper further provides philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, significance/relevance to the theme, policy on ECE in Zambia, the array of critical factors, practitioners' perspectives, proposes the way forward, concludes and gives recommendations.

Keyword: Policy, Early Childhood, Education, Child Development

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses what happens to children during the early childhood period as they get acquainted with the world they have come to live in. Critical factors shape children's development.

Critical factors are factors that impinge on the normal development of children in everyday life. These are factors that are perpetuated by you (stakeholders) and me (practitioner) on one hand, and on the other, by children themselves. Intervention (policy and practice) exist but per-boiled; still need refinement and improvement.

However, all children develop through an identifiable sequence of physical, cognitive and emotional growth and change. Needless to emphasize that the ultimate goal of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programmes and practices is to improve children's capacity to develop and learn.

This approach to modern Early Childhood Education (ECE) is premised on the understanding that children respond well when caregivers use specific techniques designed to encourage and stimulate their learning. This is unlike the time when emphasis was put on pre-schools where children spent their time eating and playing the same games throughout the period they are away from home. Thus, play merely helped keep children busy.

It must be understood here that a child who is ready for school has a combination of characteristics which include being socially and emotionally healthy, confident, and friendly, has a good peer relationship, tackles challenging tasks and persists with them, has good language skills and communicates well; and listens to instructions and is attentive. These are critical factors that need to be taken into consideration when designing programmes children are going to be involved in.

In order for the programmes to be successful, there is need to have interventions which include educating and supporting parents, delivering services to include children, developing capacities of caregivers and teachers, and using mass communications to enhance parents and caregivers' knowledge and practices. Programmes can therefore centre on home based formal or informal, and include parent education.

Philosophical and Theoretical underpinnings

It is important from the onset to note that Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a branch of educational theory which

relates to the teaching of young children up to the age of six. In this vein therefore, the current understanding of achieving Early Childhood Education (ECE) should be conceived as a multi-disciplinary one, embracing all forms of learning including play. Play harnesses a child's potential and unlocks a child's potential. This kind of thinking is based on the great works of researchers and philosophers like Jean Piaget, Tassoni, Erik Erikson, John Dewey and Lucy Sprague Mitchell. Clearly, this points to the fact that there have been many ideas regarding this approach to learning by children in early years. One of them is that of Piaget who believes in the "power of play". Piaget (1997) believes that play meets the physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social needs (PILES) of children. These are significant aspects of the critical factors being discussed in this paper.

Tassoni (2000) is yet another philosopher who contends that that 'some play opportunities develop specific individual areas of development, but many develop several areas'. Tassoni further purports that depending on the child, interests will influence the development of skills in different areas of play. Needless to say, issues like these are what constitute critical factors we are problematizing and contextualizing today. It is important for practitioners to promote children's development of skills in different areas through play by using various types of play on a daily basis. Therefore, ECE should consist of activities and/or experiences that are intended to effect developmental changes before children's entry into first grade.

In order to explain further what this paper is discussing, in practical terms, the theories mentioned above are used to manage behaviour, understand how children learn and to understand special needs. This underscores the key role played by the five developmental domains of childhood development, which are physical, emotional, social, language and cognitive.

In our continued reference to the works of researchers in early childhood education, Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978), proposed a "socio-cultural learning theory" that emphasizes the impact of social and cultural experiences on individual thinking and the development of mental processes. This idea emerged early in the 1930s and is still discussed today as a means of improving and reforming educational practices, which should minimize critical factors in ECE.

Significance/relevance to the theme

The topic under consideration is in line with the theme of this conference 'promoting access to quality early childhood education.' We have chosen to discuss critical factors that ensue when looking at effectively teaching children at the early stages of their lives. In the recent past, there has been little emphasis on the cognitive and social development. In this paper, we refer to renowned scholars in early childhood education as well bring out viewpoints from practitioners (practice). As is well known, Early Childhood Education (ECE) relates to the teaching of young children before they start compulsory education at Grade One level.

The discussion in this paper partly builds on viewpoints of Jean Piaget who believes on the power of play, which meets the physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social needs (PILES). This is in accord with our strongly held assumption today that the ultimate goal of early childhood education is to improve children's capacity to develop and learn. In this paper, we also contend that there are other factors which should be employed in order to achieve this modern approach to early childhood education, which include identifiable sequence of physical, cognitive and emotional growth and change. This paper therefore, has its relevance to the theme in that it discusses the activities and/or experiences that are intended to effect developmental changes in children as they begin learning and conform to teaching-learning diktats.

Policy on ECE in Zambia

The historical development of ECE in Zambia suffered a major setback due to the inability of a policy on ECE. Such a scenario is not just prevalent in Zambia but many other countries. For example, research indicates that early childhood education (ECE) provision is becoming a growing priority, and has received increased policy attention, in many countries during the past years (Akinware, 2002; Leslie Calman and Linda Tarr-Whelan, 2005; MoESVT, 2011; Hamusunga, 2012).

In the past two years, the Patriotic Front (PF) Government has scaled up the formulation of the ECE policy and we are happy with such developments as practitioners, but there are areas that still need improvement and refinement. This revelation corroborates with what Urban (2009:12) contends that while countries are increasingly determined to increase the provision of ECE, policy developments are often motivated by economic and political goals.

Due to such policy directions and inadequacies, we see lapses in practice. This will be seen in the subsequent parts of this presentation. The gulf between policy and practice unavoidably affects practice – how teachers and parents engage in ECE, both in rural and urban areas. We must be quick to mention here that the critical factors being talked about here are highly interwoven in policy and practice. We have a starting point (policy) now, we need to press on and minimise critical factors in ECE to realise full potential of learners.

Array of critical factors

The critical factors being discussed here border on many aspects of children's welfare – academic and non-academic. They also impact on their ability to relate with others – at home, at school and in community at large. It is therefore imperative that all concerned should strive to create a conducive teaching-learning environment for children, both those with and without special education needs (SEN) at early childhood education level. Below is a list of some critical factors in ECE. This list is not exhaustive.

- Hamper children's
- Emotional
- Social
- Psychological (Cognition)
- Affective
- Psycho-Motor
- Communication
- Confidence
- Friendliness
- Peer relationships
- Community involvement
- Tackling challenging tasks
- Socio-Economic status (milieu)

It is evident from the assorted list given above that we acknowledge the significant role played by parents, family and community in ECE. Basing on Bronfenbrenner's system (2005), children belong to the micro and macrocosmic systems, which shape them into future leaders. Interestingly, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1986) categorises that environments in which a child's development takes place are mutual and dependent ensuing the transfer of learned behaviours from one context to another, for example from home to school.

There are other critical factors that affect children that a mother unknowingly commits for example by taking drugs (narcotic, alcohol), nutrition and affective. These have later effects on children especially between ages 0-6, when they are not yet in primary school. Critical factors like these are what we are problematizing as critical to children in ECE.

Neglecting the impact of critical factors on children during early childhood education period can be devastating both to the child and the parent. One clear manifestation is to look at the reverse of the above listed critical factors and consider their impact on children's education and development. A pre-school that does not provide a least restrictive learning environment for children is bound to impact on them. For example:

- Mulobezi District in Sichili, Western Province, a typical rural setting, faces many challenges in running and maintaining the centre due to untrained ECE personnel, lack of teaching –learning materials, to mention but a few. This affects the quality of teaching and ultimately the performance of learners.
- The same is evident at Imwiko Primary School in Mongu Urban (Western Province) What is more is that due to limitedness in material and community-relevance to ECE in introduced centres, there is a looming negative attitude many parents and guardians are slowly exhibiting, especially in rural areas.

Other consequences of critical factors in ECE are inherent in the lack of community support and involvement. This corroborates with what Ntambwa (2014) reports that many parents think it is the school's mandate to teach children and that they should not get involved....that is why they pay for their children's education, they say.

All in all, we are saying, it is important to note these critical factors and make amends.

Research shows that when children start school at a late age (advanced in age) they lag behind in school. It therefore entails that quality early education gives them the much vital knowledge and skills they need and reduces the influence of critical factors that can impede their development. Thus, ECE accords children an opportunity to start to learn early, making them do better throughout school (Leonard Masse and Steven Barnett, 2002; Lawrence Schweinhart, 2004; FPG Child Development Institute, 2005). What is interesting is that children who get a good start with their education are seldom placed in special education classes.

Another critical aspect of ECE is play. Since it is now being emphasised as part of the ECE curriculum, play should be embraced in all ECE centres (both rural and urban), which apparently is not done the same way in rural and urban areas in Zambia. Suffice to say, play settings are crucial to the successful realisation of learning (communication, development of motor skills, cognition, among others) and should be as much developed in rural settings as it is in urban ones. But the question we can pose is, does the environment in Zambia support such an endeavour?

Practitioners' perspectives

This discussion of critical factors in ECE is evidenced by the fact that children are not getting the best for them to be

prepared for future challenges as lifelong learners. Suffice to say, parents are seldom actively involved in their children's education and are too busy to check how and what children learn. This corroborates with observations made by psychologists and researchers referred to above.

I recently flew on Skyways aeroplane from Lusaka to Johannesburg. I found a magazine which was being given freely to passengers. I discovered a very interesting piece of information entitled, 'Parent vs Teacher', on the theme 'Am I responsible for my child's education?' reveals that in South Africa parents feel that it is the job of the teachers to teach and not themselves as parents. One parent complained thus 'and now we are told we are responsible for our children's education? Surely, this cannot be right! Why do I send them to school – where are the teachers – if my children's success in school is still up to me?' Yet, in order to provide children with an education that will enrich and provide them with a foundation for adulthood, parents must be involved. It is not about working with teachers to ensure the brightest possible future for our children (Skyways, July, 2014). The issues being raised here are part of the critical factors in ECE under discussed today world over. This is the more reason why there is need to break the barriers that perpetuate these critical factors in ECED.

This kind of thinking is found worldwide and needs to be corrected in the minds of parents, as partners in early childhood education they need to be involved in their children's education. It must be appreciated that to provide children with an education that will build them and provide them with a foundation for adulthood, parents have to be involved. It is not about parents versus or being against teachers; but it is about parents working with teachers to ensure the brightest possible future for our children (Airlink, July 2014:40-42).

Suffice to say, the current ECE curriculum has gaps that notably entertain critical factors in ECE. Even when research findings contend that a preschool curriculum is one that delivers educational content through daily activities, tuition and furthers a child's physical, cognitive and social development (UNESCO, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011; Kasanda, 2006). There are some shortcomings in this regards. This is missing in the current preschool curriculum.

There exists abundant information regarding policy and practice of ECE in both rural and urban areas of Zambia. In Western Province, at least every Pre-school opened has a trained ECE teacher with the rest not trained (Ntambwa, 2014). In most instances, these teachers underwent one-year training programmes in ECE. But one question we are raising today is if these ECE teachers really adequately trained to handle ECE learners? Can critical factors brought out earlier be cushioned by these teachers? What is the caliber of these teachers, to be entrusted with learners at such a delicate grade level? These remain crucial and key in teaching-learning practices at ECE level – both in urban and rural areas.

What is more is that the situation is not any better in private schools. Just like in government run pre-schools, private pre-schools have teaching staff inadequacies and are constantly recruiting teachers, most of whom are teacher-trainees, mere grade twelve school leavers. In very exceptional circumstances, there are some private pre-schools that employ retired teachers.

By and large, critical factors in ECE are a cornerstone in children's education if well managed and minimized can hardly impact on learners. Bringing out real-life circumstances of ECE teachers and learners helps envisage varying critical factors. What is more is that these critical factors can be promoted by poor infrastructure and poor teaching-learning resources, which unavoidably hinders or promotes learning. In a study of ECE in Sichili, Mulobezi District, Mukelabai (2014) found that the newly established pre-schools have poor classroom infrastructure and inadequate teaching-learning materials; pupil enrollments are too high; there is over-reliance on the only trained ECE teachers with the untrained ones, who are the majority teaching and caring for children wrongly. As noted by many ECE teachers, the situation is intolerable because wrongly handling an ECE learner is more damaging than not all.

Research findings also (Mukelabai, 2014) indicate that some private-owned pre-schools do not employ trained teachers. In a study in Mongu, Western Province, Chuma (2014) found that there were more untrained ECE teachers in private-owned preschools than government ones. At one of the schools, a teacher handled as many as 26 pupils of ages ranging from 2 to 6. Regarding a newly opened ECE centre at Imwiko Primary School in Mongu, the study revealed that there are two classes of 45 and 42 children whose age ranges were between 5 and 6 years, in each of these classes; three trained teachers from private institutions who handle the classes; and that there were no teaching-learning materials.

Research indicates that children learn more efficiently and gain more knowledge through play-based activities which include dramatic play, art and social games. Observations by practitioners is consistent with emphasis being put on need to design childhood programmes; urging practitioners to promote children's development of skills in different areas through play by using various types of play on a daily basis.

Early childhood professionals have long recognised the importance of language and literacy in preparing children to succeed in school (Matafwali, 2007; Thomas & Thomas, 2009; UNESCO, 2010, 2011; Zuilkowski, Fink, Moucheraud and Matafwali, 2012). This explains why former South African President Nelson Mandela once said that "Education is the onset powerful weapon which can be used to change the world". Moreover, experience has shown that early childhood education plays a key role in enabling the kind of early learning experiences that research (Matafwali and Munsaka, 2011; Newsletter of the Africa Early Childhood Care and Development Initiative 2010; Kasanda, 2006) shows

are linked with academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates and enhanced productivity in adult life.

Thus, minimizing critical factors in ECE is a cornerstone in achieving quality ECED today. This corroborates with what Schweinhart (1988:7) contends that:

“Long- term benefits result only from high-quality early childhood development programmes...ones characterized by a child development curriculum, trained teaching staff, administrative leadership and curriculum support, small classes with a teacher and a teaching assistant, and systematic efforts to involve parents as partners.”

Way Forward

It is extremely difficult for one to watch children get spoilt in society by pseudo-teachers, guardians and parents. Parentage is as much a critical factor as is schooling in ECE. Henceforth, it is incumbent on all stakeholders in ECE to work together and ensure critical factors are minimized at all costs, by all means. The following are but some of the ways to employ:

- Massive sensitisation in communities on various critical factors in ECE and how to minimise and intervene in circumstances where they are experienced.
- Developing capacities of caregivers and teachers
- Using mass communication to harness positive mind-set change towards promoting ECE
- Promoting nutrition-tailored forum discussions
- Promoting home-based ECE programmes

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has revealed that a lot of emphasis is put on the need for policy and practice to be streamlined in order to ensure that programmes are designed to benefit children. It has been discussed that there is need for interventions to be put in place which will include educating and supporting parents as well as delivering services to children. It has been further discussed that there is need for developing capacities of caregivers and teachers and using mass communications to enhance parents and caregivers' knowledge and practices. This can be done by expanding access to quality ECED services so that they include children from poor and disadvantaged families is an investment in the future of not only those children but also their communities and societies. Programmes can therefore be at a neutral centre or home-based, formal or informal, and include parent education. Therefore, ECED programmes have a powerful equalizing potential for societies and ensuring equitable investment in such programmes which is likely to be far more cost-effective than compensating for the difference in outcomes in later life. It has however been noted that achieving this will require concerted action to organize delivery systems that are financially sustainable, monitor the quality of programming and outcomes, and reach the needy.

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