

HIGH PRIORITY FACTORS FOR A POSSIBLE ACCREDITATION MODEL FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN BOTSWANA

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate on high priority factors that would need to be incorporated in a possible accreditation model for Botswana. The research collected data from participants through interviews and questionnaires. Three factors were identified as critical: safety devises, Mission and Vision and a strong Parents Teachers Association. These factors were also ranked according to priority as listed above, and should the clientele and the Botswana Qualifications Authority see a need to formulate an accreditation model to be used as an assessment tool in ECE in Botswana, these factors would need to be taken into consideration. The Botswana Qualifications Authority would further need to apply compliance checks that may be numeric in its assessment procedures.

Key words: accreditation model, early childhood education, high priority factors, Botswana, quality education, teaching approaches

Introduction

The paper discusses the possibility of formulating and accreditation model for Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Botswana. The aim of the article is to identify aspects which could be considered a high priority in formulating an ECE model suitable for Botswana. The research undertaking is based on the Minimal Accreditation Model (MAM). In the MAM, agreed upon criteria are put in place to be used to assess and compare ECE provisions or practices. In relation to accreditation standards for establishing quality in ECE, the fundamentals may include a prescription for a *minimal core* provided by MAM. This model recommends that the ‘minimal’ philosophy be adhered to; thus, it can be an appropriate way to start the processes of accrediting the provision of ECE in Botswana. It can also factor in policies and documents already in place, such as the ECEP of 2001, to ensure that it is comprehensive in assessment.

As mentioned above, the MAM requires providers to satisfy the basics, *minimal core* requirements, which, among other things, makes it an obligation for ECE providers to have enough budget to run the pre-schools; further that infrastructure should be able to accommodate children and their need. It also requires that the size and skill base of school and adequate coverage of the basic topics in the curriculum be established (Damme, 2002).The MAM determines basic characteristics of the school and program. It is often numeric and regulation based, focusing on basic questions such as: Does the school satisfy basic legal requirements? Does the school have enough budget, infrastructure and reserves to

conduct the program? It further ascertains that the fundamentals in a school setup are in place.

MAM supports and strengthens this study in assessing practices pertaining learners in terms of characteristics like family backgrounds,; evaluating learning environments with regard to whether they are healthy, safe, protective and adequate; considering the relevance of content and other learning materials as well as the teaching approaches—whether they are child-centered and if skillful assessment is used; and finally identifying learning outcomes with regard to whether they encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society (UNICEF, 2000).

Data Collection Methods

The study collected data by means of interviews and questionnaires. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted. The duration of each interview was between 30 minutes to 1 hour. The purpose of the interviews was to solicit views of teachers and teacher aides as well as School Heads about aspects which could be considered high priority in formulating an ECE model suitable for Botswana. All interviews were carried out in English and an audio recorder was used to capture the proceedings. This study used the questionnaire as a method of data collection because of the following reasons. (a) The questionnaire gave respondents time to consider answers carefully without interference from, for example, an interviewer; (b) they also cut costs, it was possible to provide questionnaires to large numbers of people simultaneously: in this case schools were simultaneously given these questionnaires; (c) questionnaires also gave the study uniformity; each respondent received an identical set of questions. With closed-form questions, responses are standardized, which can assist in interpreting from large numbers of respondents; (d) the questionnaire addressed a large number of issues and questions of concern in a relatively efficient way, with the possibility of a high response rate. In this study there were 89 questionnaires and 50 questions; (e) they also permitted anonymity, which in turn increased the rate of response and also increased the likelihood that responses reflect genuinely held opinions (Neuman, 2003).

Data Analysis

The current investigation used mathematical and computational techniques to analyse the data. The level of significance was tested using SPSS. Among other things SPSS generated a technique known as Principal Component Analysis (PCA). This is a technique used to emphasize variation and bring out strong patterns in a dataset. It is often used to make data easy to explore (Albers, 2017). Basically PCA is a way of identifying patterns in data, expressing data in a way to highlight the similarities and differences because these may be difficult to highlight in data of high dimension (Treiman, 2009). One major advantage of PCA is that PCA has the potential to reduce the number of dimensions without much loss of information (Spector, Merrill & Elen, 2013). Since the study had many variables, 50 questions and 89 questionnaires, it was important to find a technique that could reduce the number of variables according to the percentages that participants viewed the particular aspect. The study thus prioritised aspects that were highly recommended by participants in the accreditation model because of percentages the particular aspect accumulated.

A technique known as Factor Analysis (FA) was used to analyse the variables. Factor Analysis is not designed to test a hypotheses, it is included in the SPSS package to reduce data (Pallant, 2001). This technique takes a large set of variables and looks at a way that the data may be reduced or summarised using a smaller set of factors or components.

Findings and Discussion

The most preferred aspects per participants views

As indicated earlier, the aim of the article is to identify aspects which could be considered a high priority in formulating an ECE model suitable for Botswana. The findings of the study show that the most preferred aspects/factors in regards to participants' views were those in the .900 rankings and these were three in number. These were safety devices, mission and vision and establishing a strong PTA. Table 1 shows the rankings of these three.

Table 1 : The most preferred aspects per participants' views .900+ - .931

Aspect	Rankings
Safety Devices	.932
Mission & Vision	.931
Establishing a Strong PTA	.909

These aspects were followed by those who fell between .908- .850. The last aspects were below the cut-off point of .850-824. These will be discussed in order of preference and their importance in the accreditation model starting with the highest to the lowest.

Safety devices .932

The issue of safety devices was rated high as an integral aspect of the accreditation model. Consequently it attracted a high value .932. Safety devices were valued as high priority because the lives of pupils and teachers depend on the safety of the environment. Safety devices incorporate gadgets that could be used during an emergency, such as in the case of a fire outbreak. These gadgets may include among others fire extinguishers, alarms and sand to be used for putting out fire. These gadgets are usually placed in strategic places where they could be retrieved easily and quickly when the need arises.

The participants' very high ranking of safety as an important aspect of the provision of ECE program is supported by literature. According to Hearron & Hildebrand (2007), safety is the primary concern for an ECD program. Curtis & O'Hagan (2007) recommend that ECE programs should among other things consider it their responsibility to provide safety by adequately supervising children at all times, organising safe procedures for parking and having records of names of people authorised to pick children with complete photos for identification. Butin & Woolums, (2009) add among other things be secure carpeting, scald proof spouts, covered electrical outlets and gates on stairways, and argue that these should be made standard in all facilities of ECE.

Mission and Vision .931

The second factor that was highly prioritised was mission and vision at .931. The mission and vision of the program basically refers to the philosophy or the guiding principle. On the one hand, mission statements define the organization's purpose and primary objectives (Follari, 2015). Vision statements, on the other hand, define the purpose for the school, focusing on goals and aspirations. These statements are designed to be uplifting and inspiring (Henniger, 2017). Teachers and management should be attuned to the aspirations of the mission and vision of the school and what they intend to achieve for the learners at the end of the program (Gordon & Browne, 2013). Programs must have mission and vision to provide a sense of direction and purpose. This makes it inevitable that mission and vision to be included in the MAM (Jackman, 2012).

ECE in Botswana is not coordinated at the moment. This leaves the possibility of providers to carry out services that are could be below standard. Through experience and exposure to ECE programs around Botswana, I have seen the best and the worst ECE programs. Indeed some of the programs are run very well, but others leave much to be desired. There are schools that have no philosophy, mission and vision and all the policies that can assist the school to function effectively. In some of the mediocre schools that I have seen, there was no curriculum that teachers were using; as a result teachers were forced to use the Standard 1 curriculum. Children exposed to this kind of learning are highly disadvantaged because they are exposed to content that is not *age appropriate* as a result they may find it too difficult.

Establishing a strong Parents Teachers Association .909

The third aspect that was highly recommended to be made a part of the Minimal Accreditation Model was the establishment of a very strong Parents Teachers Association (PTA) .909. The involvement/participation of parents in the education of their children is very crucial because it is through such links that educators can narrow the gap between the home and the school. Such a link is necessary because it creates a platform whereby pertinent issues such as curriculum, fund raising activities, building of strong relationships and partnerships with families and parental education can all be discussed (Follari, 2015). Parents could be urged to be of assistance with regards to issues such as home-work and personal hygiene of their children. Parents who are PTA committee members could also assist teachers in liaising with other parents who are not members of PTA on matters relating to their children's education, areas of interest and health issues (Henniger, 2017).

The proverb that says '*it takes a whole village to educate a child*' is highly applicable in Botswana context, especially in Botswana ECE. That participant prioritized this aspect shows that they wish to establish the partnership and involvement of parents in the education of their children. There could be various reasons for this. Firstly, the involvement will assist not only the teachers but also the children as what they learnt in school will be enhanced at home in a contextual manner. Learning that is in a vacuum, that is, the acquisition of knowledge and skills without context is not effective for young children. Young children need to learn in context, and the inclusion of the parents using PTA could help make this

possible (Follari, 2015). Secondly, PTA can bring the home closer to the school and the school closer to the home. When such partnerships are created then children receive the best from these two setups, the school and the home. As stated by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) the child's environment affects how a child grows and develops (Hearron & Hidebrand, 2011)

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated factors that are regarded as high priority that would be necessary to be included in the accreditation model should there be a need to formulate such a model. The factors have also been ranked according to priority. As the authorizing body that has the power to review, assess, give or retain permits for an ECE program, the Botswana Qualifications Authority would need to put in place an accreditation model to be used as an assessment tool in ECE in Botswana. Factors identified above, namely: safety devises, Mission and Vision and establishing a strong PTA, would need to be incorporated in the model. BQA would also need to apply compliance checks that may be numeric as the minimal Accreditation Model requires.

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