

QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ECE PROGRAMS IN BOTSWANA: A MYTH OR REALITY?

Naledi Binnie Mswela

Department of Primary Education

University of Botswana

mswelanb@mopipi.ub.bw

Abstract

This paper discusses the need for having measures in place to ensure that quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) is provided in Botswana. The need for quality in ECE is made against the backdrop of studies that have indicated the consequences of not providing high quality ECE. The literature suggests that children exposed to quality ECE do significantly better on educational and social responsibility. Based on the current reality of results in basic education in Botswana, there is strong need to explore the likely benefits of early childhood education in Botswana, with a view to contributing towards improving the quality of education. This is particularly interesting in Botswana where Government has embarked on a massive investment in education.

Key words: *accreditation, early childhood education, quality education, standards*

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs are seen as facilities that provide out-of-home education and care for young children aged 0-8 years. These services supplement the education and care parents give to children (Henniger, 2017). The programs run for a full day or half a day. They can also be for profit or non-profit (Gordon & Browne, 2016). In this paper ECE will only include children from 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ - 8 years. This is because in Botswana most children below the age of 2 years are cared for by parents, relatives or house-keepers and will not be enrolled in ECE (Maudeni, 2013).

Early Childhood Education is not a new field; the field can be traced back to the 1500s. As early as then, Comenius (1592-1670) came up with concepts that are still being used to date. These include the idea that children learn mostly through the use of the senses, thus advocating for exploration and active learning. After Comenius came other philosophers such as Locke (1632-1714), Rousseau (1712-1778), Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Froebel (1782-1852), Piaget (1896-1980) and Vygotsky (1896-1980) also coming up with their own ideas or concepts on how children learn (Gordon & Brown, 2016).

Maria Montessori whose philosophy has been used Botswana is known throughout the world. Her approach allows children to work on their own and at their own pace (Follari, 2015). This approach is expensive and difficult to run especially in Botswana where programs are running at shoe-string budgets. It is also disturbing that many people trying to pursue the Montessori approach have totally distorted the approach from its original structure to an unrecognizable status. According to Meier & Marais (2012) the Montessori approach has many different versions which sometime do not resemble the original one. As it is, there are contemporary approaches to teaching young children which could be less expensive and more contextual. There are approaches to teaching such as the use of themes, projects and webs that are economical and could be used in any environment (Jackman, 2012).

What remains clear is that all philosophers mentioned above having been concerned about the quality of education and care for young children introduced concepts or ideas that are still much a part

of early childhood system today. Great ideas such as the use of child sized material and equipment, the idea that young children need to use self-correcting materials, sequential steps of learning, child centred approaches to learning, integrated curriculum, the value of play in learning and many more are still appropriate and applicable to ECE (Henniger, 2017).

Because of all these ideas raised by the philosophers, Early Childhood Education has grown significantly worldwide, and with the growth there is agreement by all involved in the education of young learners that it is important that all young children need Early Childhood Education to develop holistically. The holistic development should provide children with educational and nurturing experiences in all important domains such as physical development, cognitive development, social development and emotional development.

In addition to the philosophers who brought about these ideas, theorists also played their part in developing theories that are used world-wide to guide and inform all those involved with the education of young children. *Maturationalists* and *behaviourists* theorists have made significant contributions to the field of ECE. *Maturationalists* theorists believe that human traits are determined by genetics and children mature with time, while *behaviourists* believe that human traits are acquired through experiences with the environment. According to *behaviourists'* theorists, adults can purposively shape desired learning through positive reinforcement (Meir & Marais, 2012).

In addition to the theories mentioned above, global organizations such as United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and Governments have taken a key interest in the education and care of children. They argue that programs should among other things improve the quality and content, as well as training for all those that are involved (Trawick- Smith, 2006). Consequently, with the variety in theories, cultural dynamics, economic status, there are so many variations and differences in the provisions and care of young learners. In Botswana, for example, there are many varieties of ECE that differ in service delivery (Maundeni, 2013).

The National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is an organisation that has gained international reputation with regards to the education and care of children worldwide. This organisation has come up with position statements called *Developmental Appropriate Practices* (DAP). Practitioners who use DAP focus on three important sources of knowledge to teach young children (Gordon & Browne, 2016). They use what they know about children's development and learning. These practitioners also use knowledge about the strengths, needs and interest of children. Lastly, they use knowledge about the social, cultural contexts of the children. The need for program quality has been fiercely debated by authors in ECE over the last few decades. This has been so because all those involved in the education of young children see great advantages when children are exposed to quality programs rather than those without quality.

The meaning of Early Childhood Education

While there is agreement that all children need quality education, professionals have disagreements about what quality is, what makes a quality programme, which programmes are of quality, which programmes are more likely to meet quality requirement and which ones fall below the quality bench mark. Some of the professionals currently debating about this include Heckman (2011), Heckman, Pinto & Savelyer, (2013) and Litjens & Taguma, (2010).

Quality should be decided upon by individuals looking at the political and the socio-economic status, as well as the cultural background of children. A ready-made or an imported definition would be problematic to adopt since it would not fit into the conditions of any country including Botswana. Quality child care may vary depending on the values, beliefs, cultural and social context and also who is making the judgement. The National Forum of Early Childhood Program Evaluation and National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) has identified several ways in which quality can be assessed. These discussed in the next sub-section.

Strategies for assessing quality

Through the eyes of children

With regards to children, a high quality program would mean feeling accepted for who they are irrespective of their capability or culture. For children it means having friends and responsive adults, being emotionally and physically comfortable and the possibility of having fun, and having interesting activities (Henniger, 2017).

Through the eyes of parents

For most parents, quality child care safeguards a child's health, safety and happiness. The program should also be conveniently located and be affordable. On the one hand, many parents regard high quality care as the key to balance work and family so as to have peace of mind while they are at work. In addition, some parents may see high quality care as incorporating school readiness activities, such as early learning or learning to count, or highlighting learning social skills such as cooperation. On the other hand, some may see high quality child care as an environment in which their child is happy, makes friends, has interesting and positive experiences and learns a wide variety of things (Henniger, 2017).

Through the eyes of teachers

Research examining early childhood teachers' beliefs about what constitutes good practice seems to be in line with differentiated beliefs of practice using either child-centred and or teacher-directed instruction or learning (Bryant, Clifford & Peisner, 1991). I believe that child centred learning is the best since it gives the child the freedom to learn by doing, (Gordon & Browne, 2016) rather than teacher directed learning that makes children passive learners who receive knowledge from the teachers (Henniger, 2017)

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) provides guidelines to assist teachers in making decisions about what constitutes appropriate teaching and learning for young children (Bredenkamp, 1989; Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). These authors recommend that teachers serve primarily as facilitators to children's self-initiated activities, providing open-ended opportunities for children to explore concrete materials and to interact with each other. At the same time basic-skills teaching using drill, practice workbooks, and worksheets is discouraged; instead basic skills are supposed to be embedded in everyday, meaningful activities (Stipek & Byler, 1997).

A minority of teachers however endorse a greater emphasis on basic skills using direct, highly structured teaching approaches. These teachers see the teaching of basic skills as teachers' top priority. They also believe that children learn basic skills better through repetition and review. These teachers also believe that practicing letters and their sounds is the best way children learn to read. Children should be given formal instruction in number skills, even if they show little interest in them. Children should work silently and independently. Teachers should emphasize the importance of

quality in final products. If a child is not doing well in kindergarten, time should be set aside every day afterschool to practice school work. It is important for preschool children to become good at counting and recognizing numbers. Giving rewards and extra privileges for good performance is one way they motivate children to learn (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014).

Perspectives on quality Early Childhood Education

While there is no single definition of quality in ECE, there are some overall elements of ECE that are identified as critical to the wellbeing of children. Health and hygiene are very important elements regarding quality early childhood provision. It is important that children are kept in environments that promote good health and good hygiene. Good hand-washing practice reduce the incidence of diseases such as pneumonia, trachoma, scabies, skin and eye infections as well as diarrhoea-related diseases like cholera and dysentery (Meier & Marais, 2012). Good nutrition is also one of the most important elements of a quality ECE. For children to be able to function well, learn, play and interact with others they need to have eaten a balanced meal that could aid them in their holistic development (Hearron & Hildebrand, 2011).

A well-maintained environment set up for children is an important element of an ECE program. Children need a favourable environment that will assist them in learning. An environment needs to be well maintained and free from any hazardous equipment and materials. As a result both indoor as well as outdoor equipment needs to be regularly checked and maintained (Hearron & Hildebrand, 2011). The ECE Education Policy of 2001 states that outdoor as well as indoor equipment should be safe for children to use at all times (Early Childhood Education Policy, 2001, p.24).

Teacher-pupil ratio is critical in the provision of ECE. This is so because children need space for exploration and also need one-to-one interaction with the teacher for individual attention. When children are overcrowded it will be difficult for them to explore, interact with others and they will not be able to use the equipment and materials for playing properly (Meir & Marais, 2012).

Play is central to learning in an ECE program (Trawick- Smith, (2006). Children need equipment to play for both indoor as well as outdoor. When children play they develop in all areas at the same time. Play allows them to engage in speech or to communicate with others, and thus acquiring language. It further allows them to manipulate objects, to be creative, to construct and to do role acting. They also learn from pretence play and symbolic. All these elements are crucial in the development of each child. Gordon & Browne (2016) state that young children need play in order to develop social and emotional skills, physical motor skills, creative skills, cognitive as well as language skills. Children need to be provided with opportunities such as indoor and outdoor play areas.

Children need to be provided with areas of quiet and rest after a fun day so that they can rest. They also need to be provided with opportunities for developing motor, social, language and cognitive skills through play. Moreover, children need to develop positive interactions with adults. They would also benefit from having relationships that are crucial in their overall development. Every program should make sure children develop a sense of self-worth and of belonging which they need in order to be a part of the community (Gordon & Browne, 2010). Children further need warm, sensitive relationships. They would also benefit more if they are placed in safe and secure environments. They will also be able to cooperate with others and thus building good social relations.

Facilitation of emotional growth and positive emotions are crucial in the development of kids. According to Atkinson & Hilgard (2009), positive emotions comprise joy, contentment, interest and love. On the other hand, negative emotions comprise fear, anger, disgust, and shame. According to these authors positive emotions broaden our thinking and actions. “Joy creates the urge to play, interest the urge to explore, contentment the urge to savour, and love a recurring cycle of these urges” (Atkinson & Hilgard, 2009 p. 409). On the contrary negative emotions such as fear and anger make us experience certain bodily changes such as rapid heartbeat, heavy breathing, dryness of the throat and mouth, perspiration, trembling and a sinking feeling in the stomach (Atkinson & Hilgard, 2009). Children would therefore need environments where positive emotions are developed rather than negative emotions.

Support for and communication with parents and programs need to tap from the intense knowledge that parents have about their children. Several studies have been done to show the importance of parental involvement as well as partnership of parents and teachers in the education of young children. These studies have highlighted the importance of such relationships (Edutopia, 2000; Tighe & Childs, (2000), Fantuzzo, Christenson & Sheridan, (2001) and David, Alexandra, Doctoroff and Camilo, 2008). According to these studies, parents who are in tune with what their kids are doing in school are better able to connect what kids have done at school and what is taking place at home. These parents are able to extend the experiences the child has at school to real life experiences at home, creating learning that is in context (Reynolds, Ou & Topitzes, 2004). The authors also found out that parent involvement in children’s schooling predicts academic achievement in ECE through to High School.

It is essential that programs respect the different cultures within the community. Botswana has different nationalities accommodated in our schools that need to feel welcome and respected. These different nationalities bring diversity of cultures within the ECE programs. Reid & Sharon (2015) stated that no one can ignore diversity, least of all those who work with young children; consequently, we must prepare learners to live with diversity and to celebrate it.

Quality that goes beyond narrow academic gains such as literacy, numeracy to social, emotional, cultural as well as artistic and physical goals. The definition by NAEYC describes a high quality program as providing a “safe, nurturing environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of children while responding to the families (Heckman, Pinto & Savelyer, 2013). According to NAEYC, components of high quality program include the development of policy guidelines. Such guidelines include an approach to teaching that is grounded in the research on how young kids develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education. This framework is designed to promote young learners optimal learning and development. DAP requires that teachers meet young learners where they are (by stage of development), both as individuals and as part of a group, embrace the child’s cultural background and help each child meet challenging and achievable learning goals.

Ceglowski & Bacigalupa (2002) argued that there are four types of perspectives on ECE quality derived from Katz’s (1993) theory. These are researcher and professional perspective, parent perspectives, child perspectives and staff perspectives. Pugh and Duffy (2010) define quality as comprising two components namely process quality and structural quality. They look at process quality as a concept that deals with learners actual experiences, such as the warmth and responsiveness of the interaction with staff and the activities they engage in. Structural quality deals with the more stable aspects of the environment, for example adult child ratios, group sizes or

qualifications. They see process quality as a strong predictor of child outcomes yet it is difficult and time consuming as it requires in depth observations. Although there is strong evidence that process quality is stronger, there is evidence that structural characteristics do influence child learning outcomes (Ceglowski and Bacigalupa 2002).

There is also evidence that structural elements have an indirect effect on learners' outcomes via the effects of process quality (Pugh & Duffy, 2010). Structural quality, although less related to child outcomes, is still seen as important. It is easier to assess and can also be clear to define and reliably measured across the different types of ECE settings. The two components that define quality are often seen as highly correlated (Pugh & Duffy, 2010).

Griesmer (2011) outlines attributes that constitute quality ECE programs as follows. *Safe and nurturing environment*: The daily program should be that which offers an environment that is both safe and nurturing. *Physical development*: The program has to offer a variety of physical activity in the classroom and on the playground. *Emotional development*: Children who enrol in ECP might enter ECE being emotional since this would be their first time to leave the home environment, as a result they would need a program that offers a warm and friendly environment. *Intellectual development*: The intellectual development of children needs to be encouraged through the use of appropriate activities. Children further need an environment that is rich in print and classroom labels to develop their vocabulary and reading skills.

A quality ECE program should also include social development; since social development is one of the primary goals of an ECE program. Learners should be given an opportunity to interact with peers and adults positively when doing their daily activities. There should also be frequent and positive interaction between teachers and youngsters and age appropriate activities should also be available. The activities need to be aligned to the ages of pupils so that they can handle them without difficulties. Low teacher-to-child ratio, as already mentioned is important. There should be a safe and healthy environment and age appropriate materials throughout the classroom. Nutritious meals and snacks should be available to the children. Open classroom policy and frequent communication with parents are essential. Goals and values of the program should be clearly stated.

McCullough, Peters & Whaley (2010) also look at the issue of how quality can be realised. The authors stated that the following elements contribute to quality: Organisation of physical space, appropriate and adequate supply of materials, appropriate teacher qualifications, effective instructional strategies, collaboration between team members and families and individualisation within daily routines.

In dealing with quality assessment eight dimensions have been suggested by the authors (Pascal & Bertram, 1991, cited in Pascal, 1993). These relate to the following issues: Teaching and learning styles, planning and assessment and book keeping, ratio of trained staff, physical environment, relationship and interaction, equal opportunities, parental involvement, monitoring and evaluation.

Looking at the above criteria/definitions for identifying high quality ECE programs, the criterion that is most appealing is the one by UNICEF that states that a quality ECE should have: environments that are healthy, safe and protective and are gender sensitive, and those which provide adequate resources and facilities. UNICEF defines a high quality program as one that has content that is reflecting in relevant curricula. This content should have materials to allow children the acquisition

of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace. UNICEF also seeks to have processes such as child-centered teaching approaches in well managed classrooms, assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities (UNICEF, 2000).

The following are reasons why this paper is interested on quality standards set by UNICEF (2000): UNICEF quality standards supports learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities. In the Hierarchy of Human Needs, Maslow states that only when basic needs are satisfied will the individual have the time and energy to devote to aesthetic and intellectual interest (Atkinson & Hilgard, 2009). The implication of this theory is that children need healthy food to give them the energy to start the learning process, failing which they may find it difficult to learn and interact with other kids. Environments for youngsters should be, safe, and protective and gender sensitive, and have adequate resources and facilities.

Children further need content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace. The quality definition by UNICEF, (2000) is appropriate in the context of Botswana due to the issue of relevant curricula and materials that kids need to be provided with in order to learn effectively. Studies done by Swedish Development Agency have reported that the Botswana syllabi and the curricula are unsuitable. They are “often advanced, they are to a great extent irrelevant and alien to the needs of the Botswana community and very little related to the development of the country” (Swedish, Development Agency, 1972, p. 42, cited in Yoder, 1992). Botswana has recently experienced a decline in the literacy, and numeracy of children throughout primary as well as secondary education. There is need to provide youngsters with a strong foundation in ECE. As already indicated earlier, research has shown that children who benefit in quality ECE have higher cognitive gains (Aguilar & Tansini, 2012).

One of the most approved approaches of teaching young learners is through child centered methods. With this method a child is involved in his/her learning through the use all his/her senses. *The Constructionist Theory* by Piaget sees children as ‘*scientists*’ who are out to explore and learn more about the environment by interacting with it using their own senses. Piaget’s theory, also known as the *Cognitive Developmental Constructivists Theory* views knowledge acquisition as an active, dynamic cognitive process in which children build, rebuild, discard and change their ideas (Follari, 2015).

Montessori, a leading psychologist realized that children need a conducive learning environment that they can interact with in order to learn (Henniger, 2009). The Reggio Emilia Program in Italy ‘the epitome of exceptional practice in teaching young children’ (Follari, 2015, p.211) sees children as active learners who need to interact with their own environment in order to learn more. It is therefore important not to deny kids the opportunity to construct knowledge through active exploration of materials as it is the most appropriate way they can learn.

Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society. A disturbing situation in Botswana is that our education is highly content based. This type of education does not prepare children to acquire skills, attitudes, appreciation and value for national goals as well as inculcate a spirit of positive and active

participation in our society. It only equips children with knowledge of how to do mathematics, science and other subjects. It is therefore important to find a definition of quality that will recognize the current needs of our society, in particular the challenges in our social system, and incorporate them in our education system so that we produce a well-educated child who can be able to have knowledge, skills, attitudes, national pride and be able to participate in the contemporary society in a positive manner.

Due to increase in quality research, a wide range of quality definitions have emerged as outlined above. Some researchers argue that quality is something that can be evaluated, but only based on the objectives of child care (Andersen, 1993). According to Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007), quality is a totally subjective matter which cannot be defined or evaluated. The more traditional viewpoint sees quality as an objective concept that can be scientifically and systematically measured and rationalised. Criticising the objective concept of quality, European quality researchers such as Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, (2007) identify quality as a subjective, value-based, relative and dynamic concept. As a subjective matter quality is dependent on time and context (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Moss & Pence, 1994; Parrila, 2004; Weiss, 1994).

The Need for Quality Early Childhood Education

A child's readiness for school depends on meeting his/her comprehensive needs, which includes: physical and motor development, language and literacy, social and emotional development, approaches to learning and cognitive development. If the child enters school with problems in these areas, it will be difficult for the child to learn. For instance, Follari (2015) argued that half of failure in school is attributed to gaps in early care and development.

Several studies have indicated the long term effects of high quality ECE. The Perry Pre-School Project (Berrueta –Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein & Weikart 1984) and Osborn & Milbank (1987) have suggested that children exposed to quality ECE did significantly better on social responsibility (detained or arrested, teenage pregnancies), progression through school completion, attending college) and socio- economic success (employment, receiving welfare assistance). A similar view is held by Essa (1999) and Laevers, (1994).

Research has also indicated that children in their prime years of 1-6 are in their most receptive stage of learning hence it is important to provide them with high quality education in order to make use of the receptive stage or the critical stage of development (Davenport, 1994; Essa, 1999). It is at this stage that Heckman, (2011) that a holistic approach can be most effective in developing children. The holistic approach could help instil and enhance a variety of skills such as linguistic, emotional, social, physical and cognitive.

Research by Kelton, Talan & Bloom (2013) and Aguilar & Tansini 2012) has pointed out that high-quality early childhood programs for low income families can have long lasting effects such as greater school success, higher graduation rates, lower juvenile crime, decreased need for special education services later and lower adolescent pregnancy rates. By comparison low quality care can have harmful effects on language, social development and school performance that are difficult to ameliorate, especially for schools with fewer resources (American Academy of Paediatrics, 2005).

In addition, it has already been discussed earlier that children who received high quality care are better in maths skills prior to school entry; and that toddlers who received high quality child care had fewer problems than those who received low quality care. Kelton, Talan & Bloom (2013). These

authors further state that children who received lower quality child care during the first three years were rated “*more difficult*” by their teachers. The authors also state that those who received high – quality child care scored higher on tests gauging cognitive and academic achievement. They further stated that teenagers who received high quality child care were less likely to engage in problem behaviours (fighting, arguing, being mean to others) than those who received low quality care.

The quality of ECE environments and children’s experiences while in care are important contributors to their development (Lamb, 1998; Love, Schochet & Meckstroth, 1996; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). Further, the quality of pre-school experience can predict children’s readiness in school. As children enter primary school they should be prepared with the foundations for reading, writing and basic comprehension of content areas, skills and developing important decisions towards learning (Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg & Clifford, 1993; Schweinhart, Weikart & Lamar, 1986).

Future Trends in Early Childhood Education in Botswana

It is in this regard that we need to make sure that the quality of the educational environments that we subject our children to in Botswana ECE programs provides the quality that children deserve, and the only way this can be achieved would be through accreditation. Accreditation is the action or process of officially recognising someone as having a particular status or being qualified to perform a particular activity. It is also defined as a mark of excellence that is awarded by an independent, third party organization when a centre proves that it continually maintains high standards of quality (early childhood) education and care (Berliner & Schemelkin, 2010), Kelton, Talan & Bloom, (2013) defines accreditation as a particular form of quality assurance, with the distinctive characteristics that leads to the formal approval of an institution or a program that has been found by a legitimate body to meet predetermined and agreed upon standards, eventually resulting in an accredited status granted to the provider or program by responsible authorities (Donahue & Ostenburg, 2000). To earn accreditation a program goes through a rigorous evaluation process to ensure it meets standards of excellence that go above the minimum licencing standards. A program that is accredited will make more effort in meeting high national standards in teaching strategies, curriculum, assessment of children’s learning, health and safety, developing relationship with families, community involvement and teacher qualifications (Berliner & Schmelkin, 2010)

Conclusion

In conclusion, if accreditation of early childhood education providers is put in place in Botswana, this would go a long way to guarantee quality ECE in this country. Learners and their parents, as consumers of the service, would benefit immensely from an accreditation model making sure that quality services are availed. This on its own would ensure that schools endeavour to provide quality early childhood education in order to satisfy accreditation requirements and remain operational. Research by Kelton, Talan & Bloom, (2013) has pointed out that children who received quality ECE are considered more likely to acquire steady jobs, own a home, have more than one car and are unlikely to be jailed (Henniger, 2017).

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