INSIGHTS INTO LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study examines strategies for addressing leadership challenges in Botswana's public primary schools with integrated Early Childhood Education (ECE) components. It also identifies the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to prepare school administrators for this role. Using a qualitative case study approach, data was collected through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Findings reveal that effective preparation of ECE leaders requires structured training, pedagogical expertise, child psychology, and resource management skills. The paper proposes systemic reforms to build leadership capacity and promote holistic child development.

Keywords: Leadership, Early Childhood Education, Botswana, leadership capacity

1.0 Introduction

Botswana has made strides in integrating Early Childhood Education (ECE), into public primary schools, yet challenges persist in leadership training and capacity building. This study focuses on: (1) How can leadership challenges encountered be addressed? and (2) What knowledge, skills, and competencies are required to prepare administrators managing public primary schools with pre-primary components? Despite policy initiatives, many administrators lack training in child development and ECE pedagogy. Addressing these gaps is critical for the success of ECE programs.

Leadership includes identifying and articulating a vision, ensuring shared understandings, meanings, goals, effective communication, encouraging reflection, monitoring, and assessing practice, commitment to ongoing professional development, distributive leadership, building a learning community and team culture, encouraging and facilitating genuine family and community partnerships and striking the balance between leading and managing (Henderson, 2016). In ECE where formal learning begins, leadership capabilities are crucial for fostering an environment that supports young learners' growth and development. This study identified four critical leadership capabilities necessary for effective leadership in ECE settings. These are intellectual honesty, accountability, self-awareness, and the ability to transform early learners. These qualities are foundational in shaping a positive, structured, and impactful early learning experience (Finkelstein, 2013).

Leadership in ECE requires more than vision, it demands competencies in communication, reflection, assessment, and collaboration. Effective ECE leadership

includes fostering shared understanding, supporting team development, building partnerships with families and communities, and striking a balance between management and pedagogical leadership (Henderson, 2016). International experiences highlight that early childhood leaders were undertrained. In countries such as the USA, Finland, and Australia, leadership roles in ECE evolved from untrained administrators to qualified professionals following policy reforms and structured leadership development programs (Fleet, 2015; Kangas, 2025; Waniganayake 2014). Regionally, Egypt, South Africa, and Zimbabwe have also grappled with limited access, inadequate training, and leadership inefficiencies in ECE. Nevertheless, each has made significant strides in enhancing ECE leadership through policy changes, training programs, and government support (Chiparange & Saruchera, 2016; Makhlouf, 2019; Modise, 2019).

Locally, Botswana has experienced rapid growth in childcare institutions due to societal changes such as the decline in extended families and the increasing participation of women in the labor force (Bose, 2008). Although efforts have been made to formalize ECE through national policies, significant gaps remain, particularly the lack of targeted leadership training for public primary school administrators overseeing pre-primary education. ECE was piloted in public schools in 2013, but the system lacked a clearly defined supervisory structure (Republic of Botswana, 1994; Republic of Botswana, 2001).

These challenges are not unique to Botswana; globally, leadership in ECE is increasingly recognized as a key determinant of program success, with scholars like Douglas (2019) identifying it as a driver of innovation and organizational performance. Wang (2024) highlights that ECE leadership remains inconsistently defined and underdeveloped globally, a challenge that is particularly evident in systems where ECE is newly integrated. The current model placing ECE under the supervision of untrained primary school administrators has created a disconnect between pedagogical needs and leadership capacity (Goffin, 2013). Effective ECE leadership demands more than administrative oversight; it requires specific competencies, such as an understanding of early childhood development, instructional leadership, and the ability to foster inclusive, child-friendly environments (Bloom et al., 2015). This study seeks to explore practical solutions to address existing leadership challenges and identify the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to adequately prepare school administrators for managing public schools with integrated ECE components.

2.0 Methods
2.1 Study Site, Design and Sampling Techniques
The study was conducted in Kanye, Botswana, encompassing 20 public schools sampled from 24 that offer ECE. This qualitative study used a case study design.

Purposive sampling selected 28 participants who were involved in managing ECE components at their schools. These included school heads, deputy school heads, heads of department (HoDs) infant, and senior teachers.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection methods included in-depth interviews focus group discussions, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted in reception classrooms during afternoon hours. Focus groups consisted of senior teachers representing different subject areas. Thematic analysis was used to process qualitative data. Data was coded and categorized using ATLAS.ti software. Emerging patterns were used to draw conclusions about training needs and leadership challenges.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

The researcher issued a consent form to verify that the participants understood the purpose of the study and that they were aware of their rights to participate (or not to) and to confirm their willingness to take part (Chilisa & Preece, 2006). In so doing, the following needs were considered by the participants. Participants in this study should have no negative thoughts about participating since the researcher assured the participants that their names were not going to be exposed. The respondents were made aware of the reasons for conducting the study, and how the information was to be used. In this study, the researcher issued a consent form clarifying to the respondents the purpose of the study and how they would assist by participating. Before the study was conducted, the respondents were to be knowledgeable about the nature of the instrument to be used.

The researcher did not expect the respondents to act contrary to her principles. The study was explained to the respondents, and they were made aware of their rights. The purpose of the visit was to explain to the participants so that they understood why they participated in the study. The participants were also made aware of the fact that they will not be associated in any way with the study or its findings and that they had the right to remain anonymous. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms, school heads (SH1–SH6), deputy school heads (DSH1–DSH6), heads of department (HoD1–HoD6), and senior teachers in focus groups (STP1–STP6). In research, ethics are principles or norms that guide the right choices about behavior and relationship with others (Creswell, 2017). Ethics deal with beliefs and perceptions about what is right or wrong. Behaving in an ethical way will increase the chances of the researcher to maintain a positive relationship with the participants during the time of the study.

3.0 Research Findings

3.1 Suggested Interventions for Leadership Challenges Encountered

The theme emerged through a detailed analysis of participants' suggestions, which were categorized into four sub-themes: Training and Professional Development, Collaborative Planning and Benchmarking, Child-Centered Methods and Resource Utilization, and Parental and Stakeholder Involvement. Figure 1 identifies the suggested interventions for leadership challenges encountered. By examining the participants' responses, as highlighted in Figure 1, it was possible to delineate their proposed interventions for addressing these challenges (cf. Table 1). The following sections explain how each sub-theme was derived from the data.

**Figure 1: How Leadership Challenges can be addressed**
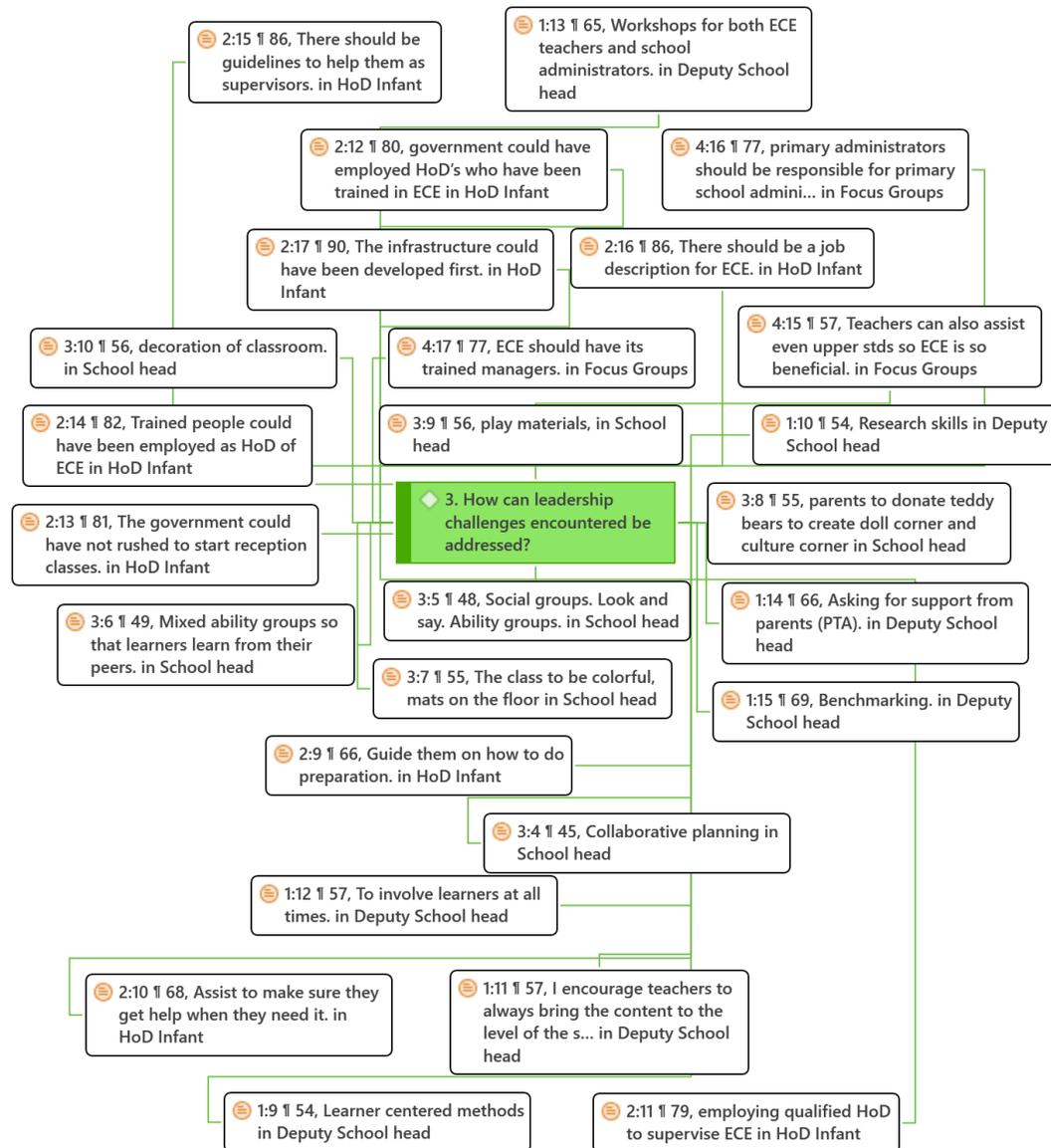
Table 1: Proposed Interventions for Addressing ECE Challenges

Theme	Sub- Theme
Suggested interventions for leadership challenges in Early Childhood Education (ECE) management	• Professional Development • Collaborative planning and benchmarking • Child – Centered Methods and Resource Utilization • Parental and stakeholder involvement

3.1.1 Professional Development

Participants consistently emphasized the need for training and professional development to enhance the management of ECE programs. The initial step involved identifying and coding statements related to training and development. Common phrases like 'training,' 'workshops,' 'professional development,' and 'expert involvement' were frequently mentioned. Codes such as 'Training and Professional Development,' 'Workshops,' and 'Expert Involvement' were generated. Participants highlighted the critical need for training and professional development for both ECE teachers and school administrators to effectively manage ECE programs.

There were participants whose perspective of professional development was in respect of training. Participant SHD1 emphasized: "Employing those who are trained to administer it, training those who have been given the responsibility," and for DSH4 "training is key" in professional development. DSH3 also emphasized: "training primary school administrators in ECE leadership," and similarly, DSH5 remarked: "the government could have started by training public school administrators before introducing ECE in schools." STP2 also argued: "training is necessary so that they lead ECE properly." While STP3 suggested: "training is needed to know the expectations of ECE class." Others who also associate professional development with training include STP5 who emphasized: "the importance of training public primary school administrators in ECE." STP6 also called for "training to address challenges in ECE."

Other participants' view of professional development was about workshops. One such participant was DSH2 who suggested that: "each region should train or workshop its administrators." DSH3 proposed that: "expects in ECE could have been attached in public schools," and for DSH2 "employing expects as HoDs or providing training for public primary school administrators in ECE is significant." DSH4 argued for "workshops resourced by ECE expects." STP4 also recommended that: "the government should employ qualified ECE managers who will focus on managing ECE in public schools." DSH6 maintained: "Workshops and encouraging teachers to use learner-centered methods." Participant STP1 summed up by stating that: "definitely, professional development in the form of workshops will put members of staff in a position to manage ECE well."

3.1.2 Collaborative Planning and Benchmarking

The theme of Collaborative Planning and Benchmarking emerged from participants' suggestions on improving ECE management through collaboration and learning from other successful schools. Codes such as 'collaborative planning,' 'benchmarking,' and 'stakeholder involvement' were created from phrases like 'collaborative planning,' 'benchmarking from other schools,' and 'involving stakeholders.' Participants highlighted that collaboration and benchmarking from successful schools were seen as essential strategies for improving ECE management.

Participant SHD1 emphasized "Collaborative planning, teamwork, and benchmarking from other schools," similarly DSH3 suggested "involving other stakeholders." Participant DSH5 recommended "benchmarking, use of internet and workshops," while HoD1 noted: "Guide them on how to do preparation. Check if they do what they have been assigned to do. Observe registers, schemes of work and give feedback." HoD6 also suggested "monitoring schemes of work and timely completion of tasks." HoD3 suggested "assisting in compiling acquisitions, involving parents in meetings, and ensuring timely support," while HoD5 remarked that "the government could have not rushed to start reception classes. People who were to supervise ECE could have been trained first."

3.1.3 Child-Centred Methods and Resource Utilization

This theme was identified from participants' emphasis on using child-centered methods and effectively utilizing available resources. Codes such as 'child-centred methods,' 'resource utilization,' and 'classroom decoration' were created from statements like SHD2's call for a colorful classroom with donated materials, and SHD5's description of 'child-centred methods' including social and ability groups. Participants recommended implementing child-centred methods and effectively utilizing resources to enhance the ECE program.

SHD2 suggests that "the class should be colorful with mats on the floor, and that parents should donate teddy bears to create a doll corner and culture corner. This will not only make the classroom attractive to learners but will also allow children to use concrete objects during learning, enhancing their manipulative skills." SHD5 emphasized the need for the "child-centered method", so they learn through doing, seeing, Social groups, Look and say, Ability groups. The child centered methods are critical at this stage because they cater for individual needs and foster holistic development of each learner. These methods also lead to increased engagement of learners which makes them understand concepts in detail as well as the development of essential life skills" Participant SHD6 noted that the "child-centered method which encourages learners to memorize concept better and develop problem solving skills. It also makes learning enjoyable, is challenging and

learners are motivated to use their existing knowledge to solve new problems. Mixed ability groups which foster a more inclusive and collaborative learning environment, promoting social skills and peer learning while at the same time leading to increased engagement and motivation for all students." While DSH6 recommended "encouraging teachers to use learner-centered methods." HoD1 observed that "class has to be colorful but it's not easy to put it in the expected standard due to lack of materials," and HoD6 concurred that "there is shortage of resources and infrastructure." HoD2 suggested "picture discussions, role playing, number games, rhymes and songs." HoD4 remarked, "No idea."

3.1.4 Parental and Stakeholder Involvement

Participants highlighted the role of parental and stakeholder involvement in enhancing ECE programs. Codes such as 'parental involvement,' 'stakeholder involvement,' and 'community support' were generated from statements like SHD2's suggestion for parents to donate items and HoD3's focus on involving parents in meetings. Participants emphasized that involving parents and other stakeholders is crucial for the success of the ECE program. For instance, SHD2 suggested for "parents to donate teddy bears to create a doll corner and culture corner," while DSH3 recommended "involving other stakeholders." Participant HoD3 shared the same sentiment. He suggested "involving parents in meetings."

There were participants who suggested other interventions besides the involvement of parents or stakeholders in general. One such participant was STP4 who argued that "there was need for the government to employ qualified ECE managers who will focus on managing ECE in public schools," while STP5 had a different view which was "training primary administrators, advocating for trained ECE managers instead."

3.2 Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies are Required to Prepare Administrators

The theme "Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies Required to Prepare Administrators for Effectively Managing Pre-Primary Components in Public Primary Schools" emerged through a detailed thematic analysis of participant responses. The data was categorized into four sub-themes: Professional Development and Training Needs, Familiarity and Expertise in ECE, Addressing Overlooked Aspects in ECE Introduction, and Improving Leadership Capabilities. Figure 2 helps identify the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to prepare administrators. By examining the participants' responses, as highlighted in Figure 2, we were able to outline the necessary preparations for administrators (cf. Table 2). Below is an explanation of how each sub-theme was derived from the data.

Figure 2: Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies Required to Prepare Administrators
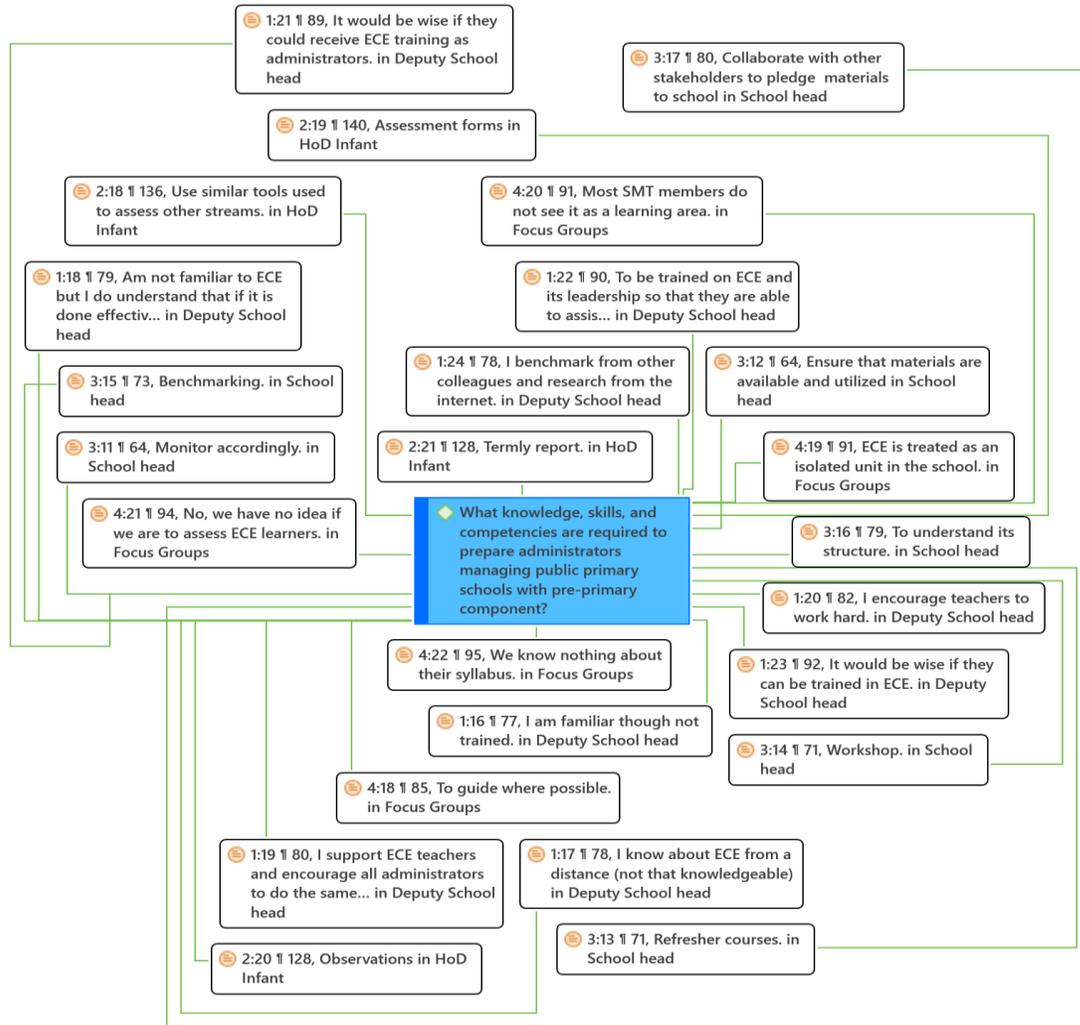
Table 2: The Necessary Preparations for Administrators

Theme	Sub- Themes
Knowledge skills and competencies required to prepare administrators for effectively managing pre-school component in public primary schools	• Professional development and training needs • Familiarity and expertise in ECE • Addressing overlooked Aspects in ECE introduction • Improving leadership capabilities

3.2.1 Professional Development and Training Needs

Participants emphasized the critical need for ongoing professional development and training to enhance administrators' capabilities in managing ECE programs. The first step involved identifying and coding statements that highlighted the necessity for training. Common phrases such as 'training,' 'refresher courses,' 'workshops,' and 'further studies' were noted. Participants highlighted the critical need for various forms of professional development to effectively manage ECE programs:

When responding to the issue of professional development and training needs, participant SH1 emphasized the need "to be trained in ECE content and how to handle it. To be trained in ECE leadership. I am not familiar with ECE, especially its content and how it operates. I rely on the information from ECE teachers and can only assist them with learning materials where possible." SH2 also suggested "refresher courses, workshops and further training so that we can be equipped with necessary skills to use when supervising ECE." Participant SH3 stressed the point of "ensuring that they follow the syllabus, monitor accordingly, ensure that materials are available and utilized, acclimatize learners to the institution, cater for cognitive and socialization needs of learners, and assist in the completion of requisition for pre-primary," while SH4 recommended the need to "collaborate with other stakeholders who can assist schools with relevant information on issues that we cannot address as expected, and to pledge all the materials that are not available in school."

Participant SH5 noted: "We only manage ECE but have never been exposed to ECE. Refresher workshops, further studies, regional workshops are key. This will not only boost our confidence as leaders but will also make us informed on other aspects of ECE," and DSH1 further remarked: "I am familiar though not trained. Since the ECE was introduced in public schools, I developed interest and kept working closely with ECE teachers who empowered me with some skills that I have acquired." DSH2 stated: "I know about ECE from a distance (not that knowledgeable). I, however, encourage teachers to do their best. I benchmark from other colleagues and research from the internet." Participant DSH3 indicated: "I am not familiar with ECE, but I do understand that if it is done effectively, it could improve the school results in future. As I went through some articles on benefits of ECE, I learnt that research has proved that learners who went through early childhood education have proved to perform much better academically than those who never did ECE." DSH6 also stated, "I am not that familiar with ECE because I have never received any training. I, however, encourage teachers to work hard at this level as it has proved to be very critical in the academic performance of learners in future." DSH4 agreed, saying "I am familiar though not an expert. I support ECE teachers and encourage all administrators to do the same because I am aware of the benefits of ECE in the academic performance of learners," and DSH5 shared the same

sentiments by stating that, "I am familiar. I know there is ECE, but I am not that knowledgeable because I have never been trained in ECE."

3.2.2 Familiarity and Expertise in ECE

This theme focuses on participants' self-reported levels of familiarity and expertise in ECE, which varied significantly. Codes were generated from statements about participants' knowledge and experience in ECE. Phrases like 'familiar but not trained,' 'knowledge from a distance,' and 'not familiar. were frequently mentioned. Participants' self-assessed familiarity and expertise with ECE revealed significant variations.

Participant SH1 stated: "I am not familiar with ECE, especially its content and how it operates, I know there is ECE, but I cannot explain in detail what it actually entails because I have never received any training in ECE." Participant DSH3 also argued that: "I am not familiar with ECE, I know it is the education offered to learners who are below six years before they can start their formal schooling." Similarly, DSH6 said: "I am not that familiar although it has been there in Botswana for some decades, it has been offered mainly by private schools until in the recent years where the government introduced it in public schools. No training has been offered to public school administrators, so it is supervised by untrained personnel."

On a different note, participant DSH1 mentioned being "familiar though not trained," participant DSH2 concurred, saying "I know about ECE from a distance (not that knowledgeable)," while participant DSH4 confirmed being "familiar though not an expert." Lastly participant DSH5 added by saying: "I am familiar. I know there is ECE, but I am not that knowledgeable."

3.2.3 Addressing Overlooked Aspects in ECE Introduction

Participants identified several areas that they considered to have been overlooked when ECE programmes were introduced in Botswana public primary schools. Codes such as 'training of supervisors,' 'guidelines,' 'infrastructure development,' and 'job descriptions' were created from these responses. Participants identified several aspects that they considered to have been overlooked when introducing ECE classes in public primary schools.

For HoD1 "all HoD Infant should be trained in ECE before they could be allowed to supervise. The participants maintained that "there should be guidelines to help them as supervisors. There should be a job description for ECE. This will curb the problem of bringing in a lot of ideas into this area since those ECE teachers were trained in different institutions and were taught differently." HoD2 reiterated the need for HoDs to be

provided with training. He argued for "HoD Infants to be trained in detail concerning ECE, to be taught about assessment in ECE."

Other participants emphasized the significance of such areas as qualifications and infrastructure in addition to training, with HoD3 suggesting that "reception classes should have their own HoDs who have relevant qualifications," while HoD4 stated: " I should have been trained first so that I get equipped with the knowledge and skills of how to supervise ECE. This could have made life easier than being tasked with the responsibility of supervising ECE when you have no idea of what it is all about" HoD5 suggested: "The infrastructure could have been developed first. In some schools ECE is housed in old buildings which are not suitable for children at all. The reason why some of the buildings were no longer used was because they were either too old or too small to accommodate those who were using them before, and it is surprising that they are now used by ECE learners. ECE supervisors could have been trained." HoD6 concurred, stating that "the government could have trained people, built suitable buildings which will suit ECE learners."

3.2.4 Improving Leadership Capabilities

Participants proposed various strategies to enhance leadership capabilities in managing ECE programs. Codes were generated from recommendations about leadership training, specialized roles, and government actions. Common phrases included 'leadership training,' 'empowering leaders,' and 'government action.' Participants proposed various strategies to enhance the leadership capabilities of administrators in managing ECE programs.

Participant STP1 emphasized: "School management must be trained in the management of ECE. This will equip them with skills and knowledge on how to effectively supervise the ECE program," while STP2 also suggested "empowering and equipping leaders with leadership capability skills." STP3 recommended for "Government to revive ECE, administrators to be workshopped or trained, assessment by well-trained ECE personnel to be done in schools. The government must consider absorbing ECE experts in public primary schools so that they can effectively supervise ECE." Participant STP4 advised that "public primary school administrators must be responsible for managing standard one to seven only, and ECE teachers must have their own trained managers." STP5 shared the same sentiments that "The government should employ qualified people to lead ECE," while STP6 proposed that "public primary school administrators must be trained in ECE leadership."

4.0 Discussion

To address the leadership challenges encountered in Early Childhood Education (ECE), participants in the study proposed several strategies. These included the urgent need for training and professional development tailored to ECE administrators and teachers, aligning with findings by Mangope et al. (2018) and Mangope et al. (2020) cited lack of qualifications and experience as barriers to effective ECE implementation. Collaborative planning and benchmarking with successful schools were also recommended, supporting Pushpa et al. (2018), emphasized shared best practices. Moreover, participants advocated for child-centered teaching approaches using interactive methods and locally available resources, despite infrastructural limitations. Parental and stakeholder involvement was also viewed as vital, reinforcing the findings reported by Tyilo et al. (2017) on the role of community engagement in improving ECE outcomes.

Regarding the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to prepare administrators managing schools with pre-primary components, the study found that many lacked familiarities with ECE, underscoring the need for targeted capacity-building. This is consistent with Bruns et al. (2017), and Douglass (2019), emphasizing the significance of equipping leaders with ECE-specific skills. Participants highlighted the need for refresher courses, expert consultations, and ECE-focused leadership development. Additionally, concerns were raised about the oversight into planning, such as the absence of job descriptions and inadequate infrastructure. Strengthening leadership capabilities through tailored training, team building, and communication skills was viewed as essential to ensuring effective management of ECE programs in Botswana.

Consistent with Stayton (2015), the study reveals that many school administrators managing pre-primary components rely heavily on teachers' expertise due to their limited direct knowledge of ECE content and leadership. Critical aspects of ECE introduction have been overlooked, including inadequate specialized training for administrators, unclear or absent job descriptions, and insufficient infrastructure development prior to program implementation (Lee et al., 2022). Moreover, structural reforms are essential to ensure the availability of suitable resources and infrastructure tailored to the developmental needs of young learners, underscoring that improving leadership capabilities extends beyond training to include governance, role clarity, and resource provision critical for sustaining quality ECE implementation (OECD, 2019; UNICEF, 2020).

5.0 Conclusion

This study explored strategies for overcoming leadership challenges in public primary schools in Botswana that incorporate ECE components. It also highlighted the

essential knowledge, skills, and competencies required to equip school administrators for effective leadership in this context. The study utilized a qualitative case study methodology, with data gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. The findings indicate that effective ECE leadership demands structured training, strong pedagogical knowledge, an understanding of child psychology, and proficiency in resource management. The study advocates comprehensive systemic reforms aimed at strengthening leadership capacity and supporting holistic development in early childhood education.

To address the leadership challenges affecting ECE in Botswana the study proposed a range of strategic measures. Chief among these was the pressing need for specialized training and ongoing professional development for both ECE administrators and teachers. The study also suggested collaborative planning and benchmarking with high-performing schools to facilitate the exchange of effective practices, supporting the value of shared learning in improving education quality. There was strong advocacy for child-centered pedagogies that emphasize interactive teaching methods and the use of locally sourced materials, even in contexts where infrastructure is lacking. Stakeholder and parental involvement emerged as another crucial factor.

In terms of the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed for administrators overseeing pre-primary components, the study revealed a notable gap in ECE-specific expertise. Many administrators lacked foundational understanding of ECE principles, pointing to the need for targeted capacity-building efforts. The study recommended refresher courses, expert-led consultations, and leadership programs specifically designed around ECE.

Further concerns included gaps in planning and organizational support, such as the absence of formal job descriptions and the inadequacy of existing infrastructure. To address these issues, the study emphasized the importance of enhancing leadership capacity through customized training, team-building exercises, and effective communication strategies. These efforts are seen as essential for the sustainable and effective management of ECE programs in Botswana's public education system.

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