

Access and Quality of Early Childhood Education in Some Rural and Urban Areas of Manzini Region, Swaziland

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ABSTRACT The study examined the degree of access and the quality of Early Childhood Education in some rural and urban areas of Manzini Region, Swaziland. The design of the study was survey. Participants were 120 teachers recruited from both rural (n=60) and urban (n=60) areas. Data were collected through a semi- structured questionnaire, follow-up interviews and observations. The study established that while access to ECE is reasonable in both rural and urban areas, the quality of that ECE in both rural and urban can be rated poor to mediocre, especially in rural areas. Many centres lack qualified teachers, materials, equipment, a unifying and relevant curriculum, adequate playgrounds and proper infrastructure. Recommendations were that the ECE programme needs more funding and commitment from the Government; the University of Swaziland should intensify the production of qualified teachers for the programme and that the Ministry of Education and Training should come up with an ECE national curriculum in order to unify efforts in the centres.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study examined the degree of access and quality of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the Manzini Region of Swaziland. It is important to examine the degree of access and quality of ECE given that ECE is a right (entitlement) for children and not a privilege. Disturbingly, some Governments such as the Government of Swaziland tend to worry more about the child's formal education as seen in introducing Free Primary Education while ECE children

pay fees (Dlamini, 2011). This is despite the fact that both UNICEF (2001) and UNESCO (2006) have urged all governments to show serious commitment to the development of high quality ECE by putting in place policies that support such a venture.

While literature is replete with the gains from ECE such as the acquisition of more advanced cognitive and language skills (Love, Harrison, Sagi-Schwartz, van Ijzendoorn, Ross & Ungerer, 2003; Crosby, Gennetian & Huston, 2001); improvement in early academic skills (Magnuson & Waldfongel, 2005); higher levels of school readiness (Rigby, Ryan & Brooks-Gunn, 2007) and more diverse interactions with peers (Shpancer, 2002), it (literature) has not sufficiently explored the issues of access and quality of ECE offered in different countries (Smith, 2014). Research on ECE has largely foregone a focus on accessibility and quality of ECE programmes (Bratsch, 2013). Bratsch (2013p.62) eventually writes ‘.....there is need for more research on ECE availability.’ To the present writer, it would appear that while research widely extols the benefits of early childhood education and intervention, it has paid little attention to issues of access and quality. It is such a position that prompted the present study to examine the degree of access and quality of ECE in both rural and urban areas of Manzini Region, Swaziland. Hopefully, the results of such a study will help to improve both accessibility and quality of the programme. Improved access to high quality ECE has the potential to optimise child development in the early years and to fully prepare the child for formal schooling (Smith, 2014).

2. Background and literature review.

ECE, also called Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), refers to the education that children obtain during the early stages of their childhood (Williams & Mann, 2013). For Bowman, Donovan & Burns (2001), such education is crucial for the development and emergence of abilities and skills such as language, motor, psychosocial, cognitive and learning skills. It is perhaps for this reason that Heckman (2000 p.50) says, “We cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults, nor can we wait until they reach school age- a time it may be too late to intervene.” In fact, there is research evidence (e.g., Forget-Dubois, Lemelin, Boivin, Dione, Seguin, Vitaro & Tremblay, 2007; Bowman et al., 2001) to the effect that investing in early years achieves a higher return than remedial interventions later in life.

In the present writer’s view, a good quality ECE programme should be a multi-dimensional educational programme focusing on the holistic development of children in the early stages

of their childhood. For Williams & Mann (2013), a good quality ECE programme should have, among other things, the following:

- It should be built around a good learning environment, with an effective and well thought out curriculum.
- It must be in a safe physical space with good facilities.
- It must be given by professional people.

For Howes, Phillips & Whitebook (1992), assessing the quality of a programme requires examining setting characteristics such as teacher- pupil ratios, teacher qualifications, stability of staff, quantity and quality of equipment, quantity and quality of space per child, materials and number of toilets. It is against these characteristics, and others, that the quality of ECE programmes in Swaziland was assessed.

As already seen, the Government of Swaziland places more emphasis on primary education at the expense of ECE. According to the Swazi Ministry of Education and Training (2009), it is primary education that provides the foundation of the essential skills of numeracy and literacy yet, as already seen, research studies (e.g., Forget Dubois et al.,2007; Bowman et al., 2001) have demonstrated that the foundations of these skills are laid in the ECE programmes. For Mavuso (2001), the Swazi Ministry of Education and Training's conceptualisation of education is erroneous given that the journey for learning begins at the pre- primary level.

The Government of Swaziland's beliefs and policies regarding ECE have resulted in very little funding for this programme. The present study assumed that because of these policies, ECE is not accessible to many children. The study also assumed that, because of little funding, the quality of the ECE programmes may be low.

This study focused on rural and urban areas. While some studies (e.g., Li, 2006) leave out rural areas altogether, others (e.g., Dlamini, 2011) do not disaggregate rural and urban areas unlike the present study. Rurality tends to affect children's access to ECE and the quality of ECE because of a number of reasons such as the deep and persistent poverty in most rural areas(Thornburg, Mathews, Espinosa& Ispa, 1997); limited social and financial support due to geographic isolation(Smith, 2014) and lack of a trained workforce(Williams and Mann, 2013).

The fact that few studies have focused on rural areas despite the fact that ECE programmes in rural areas face more challenges than those in urban areas has rather compelled the present study to focus on both rural and urban areas in order to see if there are any significant differences between the two. To the present writer, the failure of research to focus on rural

areas means the ECE needs of these people will continue to be unmet. It is against this backdrop that the present study set out to explore the degree of access and quality of ECE in some rural and urban areas of Manzini Region, Swaziland. The ultimate aim was to see how the programme could be developed so that it delivers better access to affordable and high quality ECE.

1. Objectives of the study

The study aimed at establishing the:

- degree to which ECE is accessible to both rural and urban children.
- quality of ECE programmes in different centres.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design.

The design of the study was survey. The survey research design was preferred because surveys have been found to be an effective tool in determining the opinions, attitudes, preferences and perceptions of people (Dike, 1998) as was the case in the present study which sought to capture the views of teachers. The survey design was also appropriate because surveys have been found to be suitable for use with relatively large samples (Creswell, 2007) as was the case in this study ($n=120$). Surveys also have the advantage of permitting the triangulating of data collecting instruments (as was the case in this study which used questionnaires, interviews and observations) and data analysis procedures (the study analysed data both qualitatively and quantitatively) for better understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Maree, 2007) and therefore for better research results.

4.2 Participants.

One hundred and twenty teachers (rural=50%; females=90%; mean age= 32.2; SD=0.91) were randomly selected from 60 centres (rural=50%). Teachers, rather than other groups such as parents, were involved because literature (e.g., Berlach, 2004), indicates that the only way to test if an approach or programme in education works is to take it to the teachers and ask questions about it.

As can be seen, the sample had by far more females (90%=108) than males (10%=12) due to the fact that children in this age range need motherly love and care which very few males can give. For this reason, employers prefer to employ female to male teachers; hence, the gender imbalance noted in the sample.

Overall, the study sample (n=120) was considered representative since Van Dalen (1979) says that in descriptive research (which the present study is) anything from 10% to 20% of the population is representative. The total number of teachers in the Region was 623; so 120 teachers constitute 19%. Careful sampling improves the validity of research results while a representative sample enhances the credibility of research results (Creswell, 2007).

4.3 Instruments.

The study triangulated qualitative and quantitative approaches by using a semi-structured questionnaire with closed and open-ended items, follow-up interviews and observations. As already seen, the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches gave the researcher a wider choice in instrumentation; hence, avoiding the pitfalls of one instrument. For Trockim (2006), the best hope for achieving objectivity in research is through triangulating across multiple fallible perspectives\methods.

Questionnaires were used in this study because they are suitable for eliciting information on sensitive issues like people's feelings, beliefs, experiences, perceptions and attitudes (Ebdon, 1999). Asking teachers about access and the quality of the programme is not only sensitive but also risky to their employment. As already noted, the questionnaire had closed and open-ended items. The non- imposing open- ended items allowed the hearing of the teachers' views as much as possible within the confines the design. On the other hand, closed items were useful in generating frequencies of responses that were statistically treated and reported in percentages. For Dillmann, Smyth & Christian (2009), one needs question formats that effectively measure what one wants to measure.

Follow-up interviews, held with 16 of the participants, were used to have obscure and unexpected responses clarified. They also allowed the researcher to see the motivations of the participants and their reasons for responding the way they did.

Observations of ECE classes in sessions allowed the researcher to collect live data from live situations. The researcher was able to see things participants were not free to talk about.

4.3.1 Validity and reliability of questionnaire.

While appropriate instrumentation was one way of ensuring the validity of the research results, the questionnaire, developed by the researcher, was further given to 6 experts in the field of perceptions to check for suitability (validity). The same experts were also asked to rate the questionnaire (out of 10) as a measure of people's views. An inter-rater reliability coefficient of 6.8 was yielded, indicating that to a high degree, the raters agreed that the instrument was reliable.

The questionnaire was then test-run with a group of 8 teachers. After minor modifications, the questionnaire was adopted for use with the study sample.

5. Results and discussion

Results of the study are presented according to themes generated from major questionnaire items. Percentages endorsing were also used to report results from quantitative data.

5.1 *Demographics.*

Demographic data from the questionnaire indicated that the majority of the teachers (90%=108) were females and that most of the teachers (76%=9) had no formal qualification. Most of them were either school dropouts or those who had ended their schooling at either Form 3, 4 or 5. Clearly such teachers have no knowledge or at least have very little knowledge of child development theories, let alone knowledge of pedagogics. This compromises the quality of the programme. For Williams & Mann (2013), the quality of a programme is dependent on having a qualified and professional workforce. Since there are few qualified teachers (24%=29), a lot is being said about the quality of the programmes given that the quality of the teacher is an indicator of the quality of the programme (Myers, 2006).

Disaggregating the teachers by the rural- urban variable showed that urban teachers had a higher percentage (18%=22) of teachers with formal training than rural areas (6%=7). Disturbingly, most of the teachers with formal training (20%=24) were foreigners who are employed mostly in private ECE centres. Interview data revealed that most registered centres, which happen to be private centres, pay more than both unregistered and community-based (public) centres, though the salaries are generally low. These low salaries result in high staff turnover. In the present writer's view, many people, including policy-makers, do not seem to realise that an under-paid and high turnover workforce impedes stability of a programme and therefore compromises the quality of the programme. Developmental brain science studies (e.g., Green, 2007; Kagan, 2010) show that young children need stable and positive relationships with their teachers. One teacher commented, "So far I have worked in four centres. I keep moving from centre to centre looking for better salaries. This is counter-productive with regard to the learning of the children." This means that retaining staff, especially qualified staff, is a real challenge.

5.2 *Access.*

Item 5 on the questionnaire required the teachers to indicate whether, to their knowledge, all children in their neighbourhood attended pre-schools. While the majority of teachers (84.6) in

urban schools estimated the attendance of pre-schools in their area to average 93%, the majority of those in rural areas (91.4%) estimated it at 76.7%. These figures suggest that more children in urban areas have access to ECE than those in rural areas. Visits to some homes by the researcher to verify information from the teachers seemed to confirm these figures. Some of the reasons given were that parents in urban areas are working and can therefore afford, some find it a safe place to leave their children while they go to work, most parents in urban areas have high levels of education, hence, they know the value of ECE etc. Parents with higher levels of education appreciate the developmental and educational benefits of ECE (Johansen, Leibowitz & Waite, 1996; Huston, Chang & Gennetian, 2002).

In rural areas, the indications were that ECE has not caught the attention of some parents. The researcher, during casual visits to some homes, noticed that a number of pre-school going age children were at home during school hours. Interview data from some teachers suggested that while some parents lack awareness, others do not seem to see the value of ECE to their children. Some teachers felt that ECE centres were few in rural areas, forcing children to walk long distances, passing through unsafe environments. A number of studies (e.g., Pindus, 2001; Huston et al., 2002; Li-Grining & Coley, 2006) have found that in rural areas, transportation impacts how ECE is accessed. Parents may take the decision either not to send their children for ECE or where to place their children based on minimising transportation costs and distance (Perroncel, 2000; Katras, Zuiker & Bauer, 2004). In the present study, teachers expressed the view that some parents are compelled to forego their ECE centre preference in favour of centres close home and in the process, they compromise the quality of ECE their children receive. This was noted for both rural and urban centres, but significantly more rural parents than urban ones were reported to fear for their children; resulting in some children not attending ECE.

Some rural teachers expressed the view that since the Government provides little support for ECE and since most ECE centres are privately owned, they are too expensive for rural parents. One teacher commented, "People here are poor. Sending children to school is seen as a luxury." This shows that some people in rural areas, because of poverty, fail to send their children to pre-school.

What we see in the above is that there is a big disparity between ECE in rural and urban areas in terms of access. According to the teachers, 93% of children in urban areas have access to ECE while in rural areas the figure drops to 76.7%. These results are not unique to Swaziland. Peyton, Jacobs & O'Brien (2001) found, among children in the USA, that family income and geographic location did not only curtail the child's access to ECE but also the

quality of ECE availed to the child. Some studies (e.g., Shpancer, 2002) have established a positive relationship between a family's level of education and ECE use. Huston et al. (2002) argue that parents with high levels of education are usually employed in high-paying jobs that enable them to send their children to quality ECE centres. Curenton & Justice (2008) found, in the Bertie county of the USA, that the pre-literacy skills of children whose mothers were educated were significantly better than those with less educated mothers.

5.3 Resources.

The study noted that most rural ECE centres which were either home-based, church-based, community-based or a site near a school etc. were physically and educationally unstimulating and there was gross lack of learning materials. One teacher commented, "As you can see, there is inadequate physical space for the children. We also do not have proper facilities and equipment for the children's games yet games are critical for children's development. We spend most of the time in unproductive play and singing." Apart from the fact that human development is powerfully influenced by contextual surroundings and experiences, research (e.g., Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) has demonstrated that children exposed to poor quality environments are less likely to be prepared for school demands. Observation and interview data revealed that most classrooms were almost empty and the limited playgrounds were ill-equipped. To the present writer, poor conditions and limited resources can limit the performance of even the best teachers and students. Some rural areas had playgrounds only and no classrooms. This limits learning in these centres because research (e.g., Bernard, 1972) has long established that attractive classrooms reinforce school attendance. Pupils like to be in classrooms that are full of charts, toys, objects etc. Proper development of children at this stage requires intellectual stimulation. Furthermore, most of the rural centres in the study, unlike those in urban areas, lack intellectual capital such as libraries and computers.

On the other hand, almost all centres in urban areas (94%=28 out of 30) were reported to be sufficiently resourced, with good facilities and equipment. In one teacher's words, "The centres are quite competitive here in town. This is mostly because if the centre is not educationally attractive, urban parents, knowing the value of ECE as they do, will avoid poor centres. So owners of these centres compete in developing their centres to attract more children."

Research (e.g., Bowman et al., 2001) has shown that children who attend well planned, high quality ECE programmes are better prepared to master the complex demands of formal

schooling. Such research on high quality ECE programmes has also confirmed lasting positive effects such as greater school access, higher graduation rates, lower juvenile crime and decreased need for special education services. Forget-Dubois et al.,(2007) also found that such children demonstrate better mathematics and language skills, better cognition and social skills, better interpersonal relationships and better behavioural self- regulation than do children who attend lower quality ECE programmes. By extrapolation, children from urban areas are more advantaged than those from rural areas. The negative effects from quality programmes for rural children are, as already seen so far, magnified and amplified by their disadvantaged situations- lack of resources, lack of proper infrastructure and lack of qualified teachers.

5.4 *Quality.*

For Myers (2006), inputs such as infrastructure, provision of materials and equipment for learning, the curriculum and quality of the teacher are key indicators of the quality of the education being offered. Given that these indicators differ in the studied rural and urban areas, one can be justified to say that there is a difference in quality, between ECE offered in rural and urban areas; with urban areas offering higher quality ECE. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that there are no quality ECE options in rural areas, so parents just send their children to the nearest centre.

Myers (2006) has warned us against placing too much emphasis on simple and easily observed indicators such as abundance of resources noted in urban areas. For Myers(2006), quality also refers to how the resources are used and the results obtained .As already seen in the demographic data, rural areas had more untrained teachers (53= 88%) than urban areas(38=63%). By definition, trained teachers should be more able to utilise resources than untrained teachers. The study confirmed this assumption (Item 8) but sadly noted that most of the resources are not well utilised. To the present writer, teacher knowledge and competence can deny children access to quality ECE. It was observed that most children spend their school day singing, reciting materials which they do not understand and in some cases, just chasing each other .At this age, there is need for intellectual stimulation by giving children hands-on-activities. Such activities develop children's creativity (Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg, 1983).

One teacher expressed concern about the quality of the teachers in the ECE centres. "Most of the teachers are untrained and they have no idea of what teaching at this level involves. They lack knowledge and skills that are necessary to support the growth and development of these children. Those in urban areas fail to apply culturally-relevant pedagogy to accommodate

culturally- diverse learners found in these areas.” Interview data showed that most teachers in both rural and urban areas had a limited understanding of what ECE should involve. Instead of giving these children age- appropriate activities, some teachers attempt to teach these children primary school subjects. The study established that view about what ECE and what it should do for the children diverge significantly among both rural and urban teachers. Some teachers blamed it all on lack of a defined, common curriculum- a thing that allowed teachers to teach whatever they felt was necessary.

To the present writer, quality is an empty word unless tied to the purpose of a programme. As noted in the study, there are no identified learning outcomes (objectives) that all learners must aim to achieve, making it even difficult to compare quality of programmes in the different centres. The English adage fits well here. *One can never get lost if in the first place one did not know where one was going. Wherever one is, one is correct.* This runs contrary to current thinking that ECE should connect to the bigger picture of community development. To the present writer, if ECE programmes are well run, they can attract funding which results in the development not only of the centres but also of such things as transport, road network, supply of clean water- things that benefit the whole community, especially in rural areas.

The last indicator of quality examined in the study was class size. Quality is a function of the number of pupils in a class (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2009). This is so because the pedagogical methods used by the teacher largely depend on class size. Small classes allow a lot of teacher- pupil interaction, serious pupil supervision and monitoring so essential at this stage, pupil hands-on-activities, frequency of homework and opportunities offered to pupils to discuss and share ideas. Observations made by the writer showed that most classes were too large (an average of 25 pupils) for this kind of learner. One teacher said, “The classes are too large for meaningful interaction. Most centres do not have adequate resources and playgrounds. Employers do this on purpose to cut on costs; they do not want to employ many teachers. Some centres have one teacher only.” Dlamini (2011) noted in the Hhohho Region of Swaziland that children in ECE centres were not given enough time to explore and manipulate objects due to their large numbers. As already seen, this tends to interfere with children’s access to quality ECE.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, perhaps we should note that although access to ECE is quite reasonable in the studied areas of Swaziland, quality of that ECE still poses many challenges. While educational quality is multi-dimensional and therefore difficult to assess, there is enough evidence in the present study that suggests that the quality of ECE in Swaziland can be rated

poor to mediocre, especially in rural areas. A poor curriculum handled by largely untrained teachers using inappropriate pedagogy, delivered to large classes in low quality centres lacking stimulation, materials and equipment can only strengthen arguments for the need to urgently address these shortcomings.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- The Government of Swaziland should increase funding for all ECE centres in the country and take more responsibility in the running of these centres.
- The Ministry of Education and Training should come up with an ECE national curriculum to unify the efforts of the centres.
- The University of Swaziland should intensify the production of ECE teachers so that the programme is manned by appropriately qualified teachers.

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