

Providing Quality Early Childhood Development Education: A Poverty Reduction Agenda

Jacob M. Selesho

*Faculty of Management Sciences, Vaal University of Technology, South Africa
E-mail: jmselesho@webmail.co.za*

KEYWORDS Poverty. Education. Funding. Quality. Inequality

ABSTRACT It is a well-known fact that basic education is a fundamental driver of human development. Enhancing individuals' literacy and numeracy skills is beneficial for increased productivity, economic growth and reduction of poverty. A significant portion of young children have started their schooling journey in the early childhood development centers. There has been overwhelming concern regarding the quality of early childhood development experiences afforded to these young children. On the basis of the scenario set above this paper seeks to outline the challenges facing African education in trying to pursue the United Nations' aim of Education for All, to achieve Millennium Development Goals and finally to reduce the poverty level. Provision of quality early childhood development may be an important aspect of reducing poverty. A recent evaluation reveals that although this early childhood contributes positively to the life of young children, this does not apply equally across the board. Although there are plans and strategies in place, these will continue to be just a dream if poverty continues to divide the society, determined by the quality of schooling afforded to different social classes. This high degree of inequality between schools is largely a legacy of historical educational inequality. However, it arises more from differences in educational quality than from differential attainment, since the latter has narrowed considerably in recent decades. Funding is still undoubtedly scarce, funding sometimes in, and by itself is not a guarantee to achieve equity and equality of outcomes. This paper will share insights learned through this study.

INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that basic education is a fundamental driver of human development. Enhancing individuals' literacy and numeracy skills is beneficial for increased productivity and economic growth and reduction of poverty (Korrat 2010). A significant portion of young children have started their schooling journey in the early childhood development set up. There has been overwhelming concern regarding the quality of early childhood development experiences afforded to these young children (Mahon 2009). On the basis of the scenario set above this paper seeks to outline the challenges facing African education in trying to pursue the United Nations' aim of Education for All and to achieve (EFA) Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and finally to reduce the poverty level (Weaver 2007). Provision of quality early childhood development may be an important aspect of reducing poverty.

Interest in Early Childhood Development (ECD) has heightened in recent years in South African society, government and academia. Politicians have taken a keen interest in the education of the nation. This interest can be witnessed from the Annual National Assessment Results (ANA), Trends in International Mathematics and

Science Study (TIMSS) and Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ). This can be attested by the number of interventions programme undertaken by the Department of Basic Education with the sole purpose of improving learners' achievement. Culture attests that it is through quality education that we can eradicate poverty and ensure that there is better life for all (Spaull 2013).

It is a fact that cultural causes are the only intervening ones, and ultimately could have been reduced to some other structural factors, but even then they had a clear influence on the process of development, or on a lack of it. But acknowledging this fact was a difficult proposition for quite some time. The reality of culture and education shaping people as well as of people shaping culture came to be acknowledged again in social science writings on poverty and development around 1990 and thereafter (Weaver 2007; Ishimine 2011). In view of this renewed interest in culture as an explanatory factor for growth, development and poverty, the researcher wish to explore the extent to which culture can be attributed as a cause of poverty and to see which aspects of daily life affect poverty.

The aim of this paper is to restore the due position of education and culture as a way of

combating poverty and reducing inequalities in our societies. This task has not been made easier by a spate of recent studies on the subject. While the researcher is aware that there are a number of intervention programmes in the form of European Union (EU) project, all this projects area aimed at improving the quality of ECD, which the researcher believe is essential.

According to Lewis (1961), the culture of poverty is a design for living. It is passed from one generation to another. The main markers of the culture of poverty are a strong feeling of marginality, helplessness, dependence, inferiority, present-time orientation, and little ability to defer gratification, resignation and fatalism. It affects those people who do not have opportunities but nevertheless have aspirations to a better life (Lewis 1961). Families affected by the culture of poverty are marked by free union, high incidence of abandonment of children and mother and a trend towards mother-centred families. Children have also more knowledge of maternal relatives.

If the children are affected by culture of poverty they do not participate effectively in their schooling life. They also rarely connect properly with the major institutions of the larger society. Referring to the urban poor, Lewis says that they rarely take part in trade unions, other associations and political parties. They do not make adequate use of banks, hospitals, departmental stores, museums and art galleries (Lewis 1961).

The culture of poverty should be seen as a response by the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified society (Santrock 2008). It emerges as a response to a given situation. Once established, the culture of poverty tends to perpetuate itself from one generation to another. Santrock (2008) finds primitive people as well as working class not affected by the culture of poverty. It affects the poorest workers and peasants, plantation labourers as well as lumpen proletariat. It is usually found in societies that are in transitional state. Ishimine (2011) however finds the prevalence of the culture of poverty in the developed world as well. Despite the significant socio economic progress since 1994, South Africa still has a high rate of unemployment, poverty and extreme inequalities among the community. It for this reason that poverty is regarded as one of the factors that can inhibit learners' development in their quest for learning. This assertion is made in regard of schools particular

classified quintile 1 schools (school surrounded by poor communities) are more likely to perform poorly in their school work, teenagers are speedily becoming parents and ultimately become involved in substance abuse as well alcohol abuse. It is for this reason that quality education as proclaimed in the millieneneum development goal should be made a reality.

Quality in Early Childhood Education

Quality of ECD is an elusive concept that has been long argued by researchers internationally, there is also a say that "quality is in the eyes of the beholder". However, it is also possible to highlight and identify the possible quality indicators in the offering of quality education that will help in decreasing poverty level and build capable society. Structural quality refers to measurable features that constitute the organization or structure of the childcare setting, such as physical environments, curricula, staff qualifications, program content and staff-child ratios (Weaver 2007). Complementing structural factors is process quality, which refers to the means by which the centre functions on a daily basis and which revolves around the centre staff in staff-child interaction, staff communication and peer interaction (Ishimine 2009).

High process quality, recognized earlier and characterised by positive interaction by teachers with children, harmonious peer interaction and clear teacher communication with children and their families, continues to be a major influence in overall quality (Korat 2010). Achieving high childcare centre quality, therefore, depends not only on support from the government for more resources to enhance structural quality, but also reflects staff skills and personal qualities in a balance that varies between centres. Both structural and process qualities can be measured in a variety of ways, though process quality requires more in-depth observations in order to judge quality appropriately.

In the 1990s, due to the rapidly increasing early childhood education and care sector, greater attention was paid to the quality of these services (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)). By 2006, more than 97% of childcare centres had completed the required five steps of the accreditation process. This system has become important in demonstrating minimum standards of quality and is

often used as a measure by parents in selecting a childcare centre. However, the OECD (Elliott 2004) has suggested that parents have utilized the system poorly as they demonstrate limited understanding of the quality improvement and accreditation system (QIAS) process. Although QIAS contributes to maintaining minimum quality levels, it needs to be more user friendly for parents as well as to be built on a stronger research base in order to function as a valid and reliable indicator of quality (Elliott 2004). The limitations of QIAS have been recognized by governments with the recent announcement of a new national system to establish and maintain quality in ECD. Letseka (2010), argue that ECD should be able to address the children basic need-health, nutrition, emotional and intellectual development fostering the development of capable and productive adult.

Location and Disadvantage

In fact most of our ECD centres are located around the disadvantage community; two salient points are raised by Letseka (2010) about Eastern Cape Province ECD. The province itself is vastly rural (61.2%) and it is one of the poor provinces in South Africa. It is worth mentioning that the province has limited job opportunity and the poverty level is high. Social disadvantage is often associated with a lower quality community environment that negatively impacts upon children's development.

Prince et al. (2006) argued that there is a substantial educational achievement (for example, general cognitive and verbal skills) gap between children from low and high socio-economic status (SES) families from ECD and throughout primary school grades. Likewise, Korat (2010) found from empirically conducted research in Israeli kindergartens when comparing children from low and middle SES backgrounds, that the former displayed poorer contextual knowledge and non-contextual knowledge in emergent literacy development. Other studies targeting disadvantaged populations in the United States found that low income was associated with poorer language skills, less responsive parenting, and lower quality of verbal content between parent and child (Raviv et al. 2004; Korat 2010; Ishimine 2011).

The macro system, the furthest system from the child, consists of major cultural components

such as national laws, political policy, cultural values, customs and resources and has indirect impact on the child. For example, if the government supported all working parents through affordable, high-quality childcare, children would be more likely to maximize their potential development in their immediate contexts, regardless of their SES.

Quality Childcare and Disadvantage

Significant research evidence shows that high quality childcare impacts positively on children's developmental outcomes. Further, it can be said that young children in higher risk categories may not experience successful role models, or acquire in the early childhood education period, the fundamental skills and motivations that underlie all learning, such as, adequate concept and language acquisition, self-regulation, and confidence to interact or express themselves.

METHODOLOGY

A recent evaluation reveals that although this early childhood contributes positively to the life of young children, this does not apply equally across the board. In order for the researcher to address the research questions evaluation study was used as the most appropriate design (Brynard and Hanekom 2006). The reason for this was that more in-depth understanding could be obtained as the process is less reactive than any interactive strategies in that the researcher does not extract evidence (Terre Blanche et al. 2006). As McMillan and Schumacher (2010) said document analysis is a non-interactive strategy for obtaining qualitative data with little or no reciprocity between the researcher and the participant. In this study documental analysis denotes the analysis of official documents in the form of reports from schools.

Eastern Cape Province is very rural; it is regarded as one of the poor province in South Africa. There is a high unemployment rate, with poor infrastructure. It is important to mention in some part of the Eastern Cape the poverty level is extremely high.

Most if not all ECD centre are located in the rural are, hence most sites are community based rather than educational orientated. The non-governmental organisations play a major role in facilitating and rolling out ECD programmes.

Letseka (2010) highlights that the status of this ECD is as follows as per registration per category as given in Table 1.

Table 1: ECD database

<i>Registered with</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Department of Education	699 (26%)
Department of Social Development	1592 (58%)
Local Authority	283 (10%)
Other	170 (6%)
Total	2744

The data demonstrates that majority of the ECD are registered with the Department of Education. It is in this regard that one can draw a conclusion that the province recognises the importance of ECD.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Although there are plans and strategies in place, these will continue to be just a dream if poverty continues to divide the society, determined by the quality of schooling afforded to different social classes. This high degree of inequality between ECD is largely a legacy of historical educational inequality. However, it arises more from differences in educational quality than from differential attainment, since the latter has narrowed considerably in recent decades.

Funding is still undoubtedly scarce, funding sometimes in, and by itself is not a guarantee to achieve equity and equality of outcomes. This paper will share insights learned through this study. But is there research evidence that quality childcare will benefit children from disadvantaged backgrounds? *Well the answer is yes*, Extensive international research has shown that high quality ECD can enhance children's overall developmental outcomes and contribute significantly to breaking the cycle for children in poverty. More recently it was found out that attending higher quality childcare centres was positively related to social-emotional development (internalising and externalising behaviours) for children from low-income family backgrounds. Similarly other study found that disadvantaged children who accessed high quality early childhood experiences benefited more than children from advantaged areas, and even more if these children were mixed with children from different SES backgrounds.

On the other hand, despite our economic wealth in and around SADC, South Africa still has the highest has had the highest levels of recorded child poverty of any developing country. In addressing this phenomenon European Union Project has come on board and has examined the means to improve disadvantaged young children's development, educational attainment and overall well-being.

How a high quality early childhood program could improve life outcomes for participants who were born in poverty is an important phenomena that we must continue to fight and seek recourse. It is for this that education is the only hope that can improve our social well being and ultimately bring equality to our society. It was also found that children who experienced higher quality programs were more likely to be better prepared for school, were less likely to commit crimes as young adults and were likely to earn more money in adulthood and reduce the poverty level.

Despite dramatic economic growth in South Africa, social inequalities continued, with the gap between disadvantage and advantage widening and contributing to inequality later in life. Similarly, based on data from the OECD study found that there was a clear, if general, relationship between family financial disadvantage and children's school readiness. At the same time they identified many children from low-income families who demonstrated high levels of school readiness and many children from high-income families who were not ready to go to school. This anomalous result showed the need for more in-depth research and specific research questions to address complex issues of family, children and community. Provision of quality childcare is one important way to address this disadvantage.

Facilitating accessibility to early childhood services to help build social capital appears to be a positive strategy to improve communities and contributes to breaking the cycle of social disadvantage. In addition, many international studies provide strong evidence of the effectiveness of high quality early childhood programs on children from low-income.

CONCLUSION

Prioritising Managerial Efficiency: The impact of resources on learners' achievement is crucially mediated by how well they are man-

aged. This explains why additional resources often do not lead to improved learners outcomes in many of the less well-functioning schools. In contrast, efficient schools are able to make the most of whatever resources they are given. Although the MTSF (Medium Term Strategic Framework) already identifies the improvement of managerial efficiency as a policy objective, this evidence supports it being given the highest priority.

ECD Education: As large inequality in literacy and numeracy is evident as early as grade 3, substantial efforts must be directed at improving education quality in ECD. Thus the encouraging trend towards greater enrolment in ECD should be pursued and its quality should be improved. Providing one year of quality preschool education to all children is likely to improve performance more than extending the period involved. This is especially true for poorer children, who otherwise start primary school at a disadvantaged position.

Reducing Income Inequality Requires Better Education: Substantial reduction in income inequality will only be possible if pre-labour market inequalities, specifically inequalities in the quality of education, are reduced. In closing perhaps it is important to leave the following remark “is the status of our ECD reproduction of poverty” or do they serve to reduce and improve the lives of young South Africans.

REFERENCES

- Brynard PA, Hanekom SX 2006. *Introduction to Research in Management Related Field*. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.
- Elliot A 2004. Where to for early childhood education and care? *Research Development Journal*, 12(4): 120-129.
- Habermas J 1987. *The Theory of Communicative Action: Life World and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. (Translated by T. McCarthy). Volume 2. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Harrison LE, Huntington SP 2000. *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*. New York: Basic Books.
- Harvey DL, Reed MM 1996. The culture of poverty: An ideological analysis. *Sociological Perspectives*, 39(4): 465-495.
- Huntington SP 1997. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Ishimine K 2009. *Quality and Early Childhood: The Impact on Children's Social Skills*. Saarbrücken: German VDM Publishing House.
- Ishimine K 2011. Quality in early childhood education: A case study of disadvantage. *Australian Education Research*, 38(2): 257-274.
- Korat M 2010. Poverty and culture of daily life. *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 22(2): 331-359.
- Letseka M 2010. Early childhood development trends in the province of the Eastern Cape, South Africa. *Commonwealth Youth and Development*, 8(1): 56-71.
- Lewis O 1961. *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Lewis O 1966. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty-San Juan and New York*. New York: Random House.
- Lewis O 1967. The children of Sanchez, Pedro Martinez, and La Vida. *Current Anthropology*, 8(5): 480-500.
- Liebow E 1967. *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Street Corner Men*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Mahon R 2009. The organisation for economic co-operation and development discourse on the reconciliation of work and family life. *Global Social Policy*, 9(2): 182-203.
- Mayer P 1993. Inventing village tradition: The late 19th century origins of the North Indian *Jajmani* System. *Modern Asian Studies*, 27(2): 357-395.
- McMillan JH, Schumacher S 2010. *Research in Education*. New York, USA: Pearson Education.
- Prince DL, Pepper K, Brocato K 2006. The importance of making the well-being of children in poverty a priority. *Early Childhood Educational Journal*, 34(1): 21-25.
- Raviv T, Kessenich M, Morrison FJ 2004. A mediation model of the association between socio-economic status and three-year-old language abilities: The role of parenting factors. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 19: 528-547.
- Santrock JW 2008. *Educational Psychology*. 3rd Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Spaull N 2013. Poverty and privileges: Primary school inequality in South Africa. *International Journal of Education Development*, 33(5): 436-447.
- Terre Blanche M, Durrheim K, Painter D 2006. *Research in Practice: Applied Methods for Social Sciences*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
- Weaver C 2007. The World Bank studies on education and poverty. *Journal of Global Governance*, 13(4): 493-512.