

Challenges Faced by Educators in Implementing Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policies

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KEYWORDS Challenges. Curriculum. ECD Policy. ECD Provisioning Implementation. Infrastructure. Policy

ABSTRACT This paper is a desk review on the challenges that the educators face when implementing Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy. In South Africa, it is not only the Department of Education that is involved in ECD, Department of Health (DoH) and Department of Social Development (DSD) are also involved. As a result, there is no uniformity in the implementation of ECD policy. The involvement of various departments in ECD centres results in the fragmented structure of ECD provisioning. This is because different departments render uncoordinated services for ECD policy implementation. Moreover, this has resulted to the funding inconsistency by the different provinces. The literature reviewed revealed that the educators experience various challenges in implementing ECD policies. Hence, the paper seeks to ask the following: What are the challenges of educators in implementing ECD policy?

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is believed to bring countless benefits in our societies and there is evidence that through eminent ECD programmes, children are envisaged to be functional and economically productive individuals when they become adults (Heckman et al. 2010; DG Murray Trust 2013; Walker et al. 2011). In South Africa, there is great momentum when it comes to ECD provisioning and this is because all the responsible stakeholders acknowledge the essence of ECD provisioning in achieving the National Development Goals (NDGs). ECD should not just be perceived as a development imperative but also a human right issue. Children deserve to be cared for, to be protected, to receive healthy nutrition and to be at the centre that provides ECD services (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2006). Through ECD, children are able to benefit from the developmental gains. In ensuring this, as from 1994, South Africa has formulated various policy instruments to support the ECD provisioning. The concept of ECD is discussed next.

Early Childhood Development

Early Childhood Development (ECD) refers to a period of wide range of developmental and

integrated services for children and families (Britto et al. 2011). Such services encapsulate the provision of ECD resources such as ECD centres; international and national policies; training of personnel and other stakeholders; the curriculum specifications and funding (Department of Education 1996).

The age of ECD cohort is context bound. In the United States of America for example, it ranges from 0-8 years (Britto et al. 2011; Deiner 2010) and in South Africa it is from 0-9 years (DoE et al. 2005). Looking at the South African context, as stated in DoE (2001), ECD age cohort is categorized as follows:

- ♦ From birth to 4 years
- ♦ From 5 to 6 years
- ♦ From 7 to 9 years

With regards to ECD provisioning, Department of Education (DoE) is mainly concerned with children aged 5 to 9 years as they are integrated into formal school (Atmore et al. 2012). While Department of Social Development mainly focuses on those from birth to 4 years, the Department of Health, on the other hand, covers all children who belong to the ECD age group (birth to 9 years). As ECD starts from birth until the school-going age, children have to develop foundational cognitive capabilities, attitudes and skills that would empower and prepare them for the schooling years throughout their lives.

Therefore, educators in ECD centres are the ones who have the responsibility of making sure that children in the centres are properly guided and supervised to master such competencies. Educators are expected to plan, arrange, conduct and monitor activities geared to assist learners to acquire different skills, like, language (speech, reading, and writing), motor skills, intellectual skills and psychosocial skills. ECD provisioning is very crucial for the development of any child; hence the following section discusses the benefits of ECD.

Significance of ECD

Various countries have prioritized the ECD provisioning to enhance the learning and development. Biersteker (2012) and Walker et al. (2011) contend that if a country invests in ECD, the investment itself will enhance the elimination of social and economic inequality. As a result, the enrolment rates from 1999 – 2012 have increased by nearly two-thirds in pre-primary (UNESCO 2015). This is because it is only through education that employment opportunities might be accessible to everyone regardless of race. Educators in ECD are perceived to be the most important people who can ensure that the provisioning of ECD is of good quality and standard (UNESCO 2015). This can benefit more children from poor socio-economic backgrounds as the prospects of breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty would be high (Biersteker 2012).

ECD provisioning is also regarded as critical in a child's life, this is because neuroscience research indicates that the first 1000 days after conception are very important for a child's brain development (Biersteker 2012; Martin et al. 2014). The child needs to be provided with nutritious food, proper health care, cognitive inspiration and parental support for adequate growth and development. These positively influence children's education throughout their school years, improve performance in school, lead to high retention rates as compared to repetition of grades and drop-out rates, and limit learners in need of remedial education. ECD provisioning helps to detect children's learning difficulties, social, behavioural and health problems early in life (Biersteker 2012). From a socio-economic perspective, ECD provisioning might minimize risky behaviours like unsafe sex, drug abuse, and criminal activities (Naudeau et al.

2010; Engle et al. 2011). Hence, as indicated by Heckman et al. (2010) and DG Murray Trust (2013), investment in ECD provisioning benefits societies in the same way as human capital investment. In enhancing these benefits, a more co-ordinated, comprehensive and integrated approach needs to be established in ensuring effective and beneficial ECD provisioning (Cummings and Williams 2008).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in the theory of overlapping spheres of influence by Epstein. In this theory, Epstein (1987, 1995, 2001) strongly points out the importance of having a holistic approach to activities by all stakeholders within the institutional setting of a school. Epstein's (1987, 1995) theory of community, educators and the relations in a school relations is based on the idea that overlapping spheres bring together all stakeholders with interwoven activities based on mutual trust. The theory of Epstein can be viewed as two circles of interaction that are determined by the attitudes, practices and interactions of the individual with each context. The theory is based on the assumption that families and schools have mutual interests and influences. The shared interests and influences can be activated by the school's policies and programmes and the individuals' actions and attitudes (Epstein 1995, 2001). Regarding ECD, provisioning, the idea of overlapping spheres is concerned with how far the approach has been comprehensive. Parents and community members are included in the decision-making of the school's governing structure. It is ideal for all stakeholders from the different racial, ethnic, socio-economic and other identities to be committed and included in the making of decisions for effective ECD provisioning.

Objectives of the Paper

This paper is aimed at exploring the challenges that educators face in implementing the policies of Early Childhood Education.

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopted a desk review method. Literature on the challenges facing educators globally and South Africa in particular when implementing ECD was reviewed.

OBSERVATIONS

It has been observed that the provisioning of ECD in ECD centres is facing challenges. However, it is not clear as to what are the underlying factors contributing to that phenomenon. It has also been observed that the ECD centres that are not attached to schools are the ones that are more experiencing such challenges compared to the ones attached to schools. These observations precipitated the study.

The ECD Challenges

Early Childhood Development is fundamental for any child's efficacious academic progress, more specifically, children residing in deprived situations (UNICEF 2009). There is evidence that government has made some initiatives in making sure that the accessibility to quality early learning programmes in both ECD facilities and Grade R classrooms is improved. However, more has to be done in order to enhance effective ECD provisioning (DBE et al. 2010). This is because when it comes to ECD provisioning, literature reveals that there are challenges still facing ECD provisioning. For example, as stated in the Department of Basic Education, Department of Social Development and UNICEF (2010) among the obstacles affecting the ECD provisioning is inadequate ECD funding, infrastructure and clear curriculum guidelines. Learning and teaching materials further make it difficult for educators to implement ECD policy. Under qualified Educators, poor training, non-availability of professional aid and uncondusive working environment for educators also contribute to their inability to implement ECD policies. Unsecured ECD centres and lack of parental support are also contributors to the challenges of ECD provisioning.

The above mentioned challenges impact negatively on the provisioning of ECD and this is despite the establishment of interdepartmental committee that constituted various departments; for example Department of Basic Education (DBE), Department of Health (DoH), Department of Social Development (DSD) and Department of Labour (DoL) (Department of Education 2001). The establishment of the interdepartmental committee has brought many challenges in the implementation of ECD policies from the respective centres. The following section therefore ex-

plores those challenges that educators face when implementing ECD policies at length.

Challenges Faced by Educators in Implementing ECD Policies

Despite the fact that ECD is seen as an important phase in which greater physical, knowledge and psycho-social development of a child, educators from various countries continue to experience challenges in ECD provisioning (Ige 2011). In the United Kingdom (UK), educators are faced with inadequate resource structures and the costs involved in putting such structures up are so high (Ige 2011). The implementation of the national curriculum to be followed by each ECD centre is also a challenge that various countries are grappling with (Neugebauer 2009). Countries like the UK are still having challenges to ensuring that parents become part of the learning of their children (Neugebauer 2009). This is, despite the fact that literature revealed that parents' involvement in the learning of the young ones is beneficial for the children. Therefore, parents need to be motivated to get involved in the early learning and care of their children. This can be very empowering for parents as they begin to understand the importance of ECD for the benefit their children. Some parents in UK who work or study full time find it difficult to be more engaged in the learning of their young ones due to the busy schedules, study or work obligations (Harris and Goodall 2006).

In Nigeria, one of the overarching challenges facing educators is the low teacher quality due to poor quality training in ECD (Onu et al. 2010; Sooter 2013). ECD centres are mainly privately owned. The privately owned ones belong to companies and rich people. In instances where the rich people own ECD centres, graduates and people holding education certificates are mainly employed. Despite that, many ECD centres have few qualified staff and many unqualified ones that have secondary education, general certificates and grade two educators (Sooter 2013; Oluwafemi et al. 2014). As a result of poor training and low levels of education, Nigerian ECD educators have been found wanting when it comes to using adequately instructional materials and strategies for ECD provisioning (Oduolowu and Oyesomi 2014). The literature further revealed that the vital materials for early childhood classrooms such as toys,

charts, TVs/computers were unavailable (Oluwafemi et al. 2014).

In Ghana, some of the challenges facing ECD educators are the non-participation and commitment of parents to ECD, the unavailability of teaching staff, poor facilities and institutional barriers (Barnett 2010). Institutional barriers manifest themselves in how ECD is practised, the policies and programmes put out by government with regards to ECD and societal orientation about the whole concept of ECD (Barnett 2010).

In South Africa, the specific challenges facing early childhood educators in implementing ECD policies range from poor training of educators in ECD, poor infrastructure, shortage of teaching resources, a standardised curriculum, institutional barriers, less involvement of the private sector and the government inconsistencies in the funding structure (Western Cape Department of Social Development (WCDS) 2010; DBE et al. 2010).

DISCUSSION

From the reviewed literature, it is evident that there are challenges that affect the efficient implementation of ECD policies by educators. The challenges that the educators experience when implementing ECD policies were cutting across countries irrespective of their geographical location. The following were challenges that educators experience when implementing ECD policies as literature suggested:

Lack of Proper Infrastructure

The literature showed that many ECD centres lack water, electricity, to mention but a few. In this kind of environment the quality ECD provisioning cannot take place as envisaged by the policymakers (UNICEF 2006). Educators are not able to use modern equipment like computers to stimulate the cognitive capabilities of the children at an early age due to lack of electricity (Oluwafemi et al. 2014). This, therefore, means that the ECD provisioning would not achieve what was set out to achieve by the policy due to the noted challenges.

Lack of Qualified Educators

Unqualified educators find it difficult to adequately use instructional materials like comput-

ers and effective teaching strategies (Oduolowu and Oyesomo 2014). Educators who are unqualified cannot be conversant with the instructional materials and strategies and this in turn easily affect the quality of ECD provisioning. For ECD to be effectively implemented, it needs qualified educators with recognised SAQA accredited qualification which entails sound understanding of theories of development, teacher education and inclusive education. Currently as evidenced in the literature, the training offered to ECD educators does not empower them to be effective to provide quality early childhood learning. The training the educators get is mostly theoretical, and therefore lacking in nature the practical element. This kind of situation cannot allow the effective implementation ECD policies by ECD educators (DBE et al. 2010).

Lack of Parental Involvement in ECD

Parents constitute a very crucial component in the ECD provisioning. However, there is evidence that many parents seem not to be aware of the importance of ECD and the role that they have to play in ECD provisioning (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). Upto now parents are still not familiar of their role in ECD as most of them think that no learning takes place during ECD. Most parents think that children are sent to centres just to be occupied by educators, some parents are not aware that this is the most critical period of the cognitive development of a child (Ige 2011). This lack of awareness and involvement by parents affect the quality of ECD provisioning because educators cannot be the only role players in the education of the children.

Standardised Curriculum

Lack of clear guidelines on the curriculum to be implemented in ECD centres is also a challenge. Hence, educators experience implementation challenges because there is no guiding framework that informs them of what to teach children at a certain level. The DBE has not come out clearly regarding the curriculum to be implemented for this cohort. In the absence of a standardised curriculum, different ECD centres end up implementing different curricula from their various ECD centres (Neugebauer 2009). This has, therefore, resulted in some education centres being denied right quality of education and

thus inadvertently creating an unequal society due to the absence of clear guidelines that the educators can adhere to.

Institutional Barriers and Funding Inconsistencies

ECD policies emanating from the different departments involved in ECD (DBE, DSD and DoH) were found to be a source of confusion among ECD educators due to the manner in which they are conveyed. The inconsistency in the funding structure by the government affects the implementation of ECD (WCDSO 2010; DBE et al. 2010). Education centres cannot have long term plans as a result of these inconsistencies in funding. Inconsistencies and inadequate funding negatively affect the implementation of ECD provisioning.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, from the literature reviewed it has been evident that the ECD provisioning is still faced with challenges. The challenges facing ECD affect the implementation of ECD policies. Even though there are initiatives done by different government departments in ECD provisioning, they are not assisting educators in implementing ECD policies. This is because; all these efforts are not properly coordinated. Lack of clear curriculum guidelines is also a challenge more especially with the unqualified educators. It also emerged from the literature that this is not a South African issue; other countries are also experiencing problems with the ECD curriculum that is not standardized. Parents as key role players in ECD provisioning are not at par with educators when it comes to ECD provisioning. Some parents are overcommitted to their personal endeavors and some do not consider themselves as vital stakeholders in the learning of their young ones. This is because they think that educators in the ECD centres are solely responsible for the ECD provisioning. All these make it difficult for educators to implement ECD policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that the Department of Basic Education should prioritise ECD provisioning as from birth so that this does not only become the responsibility of the Department of

Social Development. Once the Department of Basic Education prioritises ECD provisioning, the department will have to regulate the qualification of ECD educators. Through the regulation of qualifications, training of educators in ECD should be improved so that educators know what to teach as this is an important cognitive development phase of the young ones. There should be a standardised curriculum for ECD that lays the firm foundation for Grade R. As some centres are privately owned, the paper recommends that the government should be more involved in ECD in terms of providing proper infrastructure, teaching resources and regular funding to ECD centres. Parents should be made more empowered and be made aware of the importance of their role in the ECD. Tertiary institutions in conjunction with the Department of Basic Education should play a role in ECD provisioning by providing in-service training for those teachers who are already involved in ECD provisioning but without a qualification.

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Paper received for publication on March 2016
Paper accepted for publication on December 2016