

Parents' Perceptions of the Early Childhood Development Programme

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ABSTRACT

The study establishes the parents' perceptions of the Early Childhood Development Programme. The study was motivated by mixed reactions by various stakeholders on the ECD programme. A qualitative approach was adopted in the study because it enabled to get an in-depth information from the parents in their natural setting. A case study design was adopted drawing on one school which was purposively sampled to obtain rich data. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data. The study comprised ten parents who were purposively sampled. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings reveal that parents have varied perceptions about the ECD programme. The parents' perceptions fell in three categories which are reasonably positive, negative and undecided. Findings further reveal challenges such as misconceptions on play pedagogies and difficulty in paying levies on the part of parents. Strategies such as engaging parents in the ECD projects such as the nutrition garden and involvement in meetings were identified. The study recommended the scheduling of meetings after working hours or having two similar meetings to cater for working parents who cannot attend during working hours.

Keywords: Early Childhood Development, parents' perceptions, play pedagogies,

1. INTRODUCTION

This study sought to establish the parents' perceptions of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme. Several stakeholders, (parents, teachers and the Ministry of Education, hold various and at times different perceptions and views towards ECD (Evans, 2006). In this article, we hear the voices of parents on how they perceive ECD programme.

2. BACKGROUND

Evans (2006) asserts that ECD programme alludes to the provision of all the important support needed by every child to achieve his/ her right to survival, to protection, to care and to education guaranteeing optimal growth from birth to the age of six.

The introduction of ECD in the Zimbabwean was much concerned about learners from grade one up to grade seven. Children underneath that age were to be taken to private crèches, play focuses and play groups which were set up not long after Independence 1980. Dozva (2009) asserts that the centres were organised under the auspices of the old Ministry of Women Affairs and Community Development to provide custodial services for children, while mothers engaged in community projects. Later the responsibility of the custodial of the play centres was transferred to the Ministry of Education Sports and Culture leading to the practise of ECD changing from informal services to a more organised and professionalised standardised formal model to meet the international standard and best practices. The change was strengthened by the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training, Nziramasanga (1999) which identified ECD as one of the major aspects in the Zimbabwean education system. Following this recommendation, ECD was introduced in 2005 through the Secretary' Circular Number 14 of 2004.

The ECD syllabus has its expectations to come up with a wholesome child who is physically, emotionally, socially and mentally prepared. Parents appear to differ on method of communication, where some need their children to be educated in English (Gudyanga, Wadesango and Dzirikure, 2015). On the off chance that learners at ECD are taught science and mathematics in the indigenous language, their dominance of the substance is higher than when they are educated in English, particularly on the off chance that they do not communicate in the language, (Landolf, 2008).

The presentation of ECD has given an alternate scene in the primary education in Zimbabwe. It has presented the two difficulties and chances to partners, for example, teachers, educators just as parents.

2.1 HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE

Prior to the happening of imperialism in Zimbabwe, traditional societies were the bedrock of learning. Before then, education in traditional African societies was meant to equip young people for their gender-specific roles in society past (Dyanda, Makoni, Mudukuti & Kuyayama, 2005). In Rhodesia (colonial Zimbabwe), modern schooling among Indigenous populations came largely through Christian missionaries.

The education turned into a significant objective to change both in structure and content, so as to get free the educational plan of colonial content and method. The change was intended to move in the direction of equality and access to opportunities subsequent to independence in 1980. This brought about another change of mass education which advanced every child going age to be in school, hence, adding access to education. Be that as it may, the change tragically gave less consideration to ECD, until 2005 (Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture, 2004). ECD was set under the Ministry of Women's Affairs, not long after independence and was for the most part worried about the health problems through community feeding programme, (Dyanda, Mudukuti & Kuyayama, 2005). Be that as it may, nursery education remained a benefit to the whites and coloured individuals. The suggestions of The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Instruction (1999) help the acknowledgment and esteeming of ECD prompting first experience with the school system in Zimbabwe.

2.2 AN OVERVIEW OF ECD POLICY IN ZIMBABWE

Early Childhood Development is a comprehensive programme designed to fulfil the developmental needs of children which are between the ages 0-8 years (Morrison, 2000). In Zimbabwe, ECD is divided into three categories namely the infant- toddler (0-3 years), the preschool or ECD class "A" and "B" (3-5 years) with the latter being the senior class and the infant grades 1-3 (6-8 years) (MOESAC, 2005).

The approaches above obviously show the methods of guidance for ECD class A and B which are not expressed in the education policies, yet by suggestion, basing on the decision for the proper evaluations it ought to be the mother language (MOESAC, 1987). Mother language is a significant vehicle through which learning can be passed on to the ECD children. Parents appear to differ with this idea as it pointed out by Gardner (1985) who hypothesize that parental frames of mind take a significant part in their children's subsequent language learning. Most parents accept the ECD programme as the ideal planning of small children to learn English at their soonest ages. Taiwanese parents pick bilingual kindergartens for children to get ECD English training so as to get English capacities, (Farran, 2011). Most parents evade their mother language and they favour English to be utilized as a method of teaching than mother language.

Landolf, (2008) says parents accept that children can improve four abilities by going to ECD English training and become more astute than previously.

When we talk of quality education most parents think that if children are taught in English their children become competent than those children who receive their learning in mother language. Again most parents want their children to be associated with high class schools where they believe that everything is done the modern way that's where you find the most earned parents sending their children to private schools. Children from high income families tend to receive high quality care while programmes from low earning families have high enrolment and poor quality education for some but such programmes do not even reach all low income families, (UNICEF, 2000). This situation happens particularly in rural areas and high density areas where few children may even be neglected to get to ECD programme because of poor livelihoods (UNICEF, 2000).

Studies by OECD (2006) revealed that patterns of parental, family and community engagement in ECD differ from country to country. Several formal and informal mechanisms are used to foster full participatory and managerial engagement. Some of the challenges to active engagement of parents include cultural, attitudinal and linguistic barriers (Barbarin, Bryant, Early & Clifford, 2008); OECD, 2006).

2.3 Views on ECD pedagogy.

Dewey best represents the philosophy of pragmatism as applied in many education institutions. Pragmatism is a philosophy concerned with children learning in a practical way, (Akinpelu, 1981). The emphasis is on experimental learning. Dewey made experience the source of all knowledge. Dewey argues that learning comes as a result of experience that is educative and it is a lesson learnt from experience (Akinpelu, 1981). From the statement, it is imperative to note that children bring to school a wealth of experience from their culture; parents are expected to nurture their children to be actively involved in different tasks as they get more experience from them. The parents are the primary caregivers and the central figures in the heart of children's universe, (Edelman, 2013). Thus, Dewey gives parents a prominent place in the ECD programme as they are the bedrock of children's early learning. However, some parents have negative feelings on the curriculum package for an example on multi-faith approach; some parents passed negative comments on the teaching of Judaism in schools. Myers (2004) stresses that when parents reinforce what is learnt at school, their children are able to master skills and concepts.

Dewey's philosophy has contributed tremendously in territories of curriculum development, teaching strategies, the job of the teacher and perspectives on what the school ought to be. Dewey recommended that there ought to be a child centred curriculum dependent on children's encounters as upheld for by Rousseau (1712 - 1778), Comenius (1592 - 1670), Froebel, (1782-1778), Montessori, (1870 – 1952), (Manzunzu, 2020) The possibility of the curriculum basing on children's encounters and culture reverberates well with the various perceptions inside parents. Morrison (2000) maintains that Dewey's emphasis was on the child and his/her interest rather than on the subject matter (content). Morrison (2000) further refers to Montessori who said that the exercises which children find out about existence and the abilities important for living should originate from children's day by day life. This implies the school cannot be detached from the community.

With the curriculum described in this way, the school must therefore be seen as an extension of the home so that the experiences of child both at home and in the school can be related and

continuous. Such practice can be seen when ECD teachers design experiences and activities for children basing them on the children's experiences, needs and culture. For instance, when ECD teacher set and organise the indoor and outdoor play areas, they need to make it a representation of the home or community. For example, at the dramatic play area children play with toys representing things from a variety of places such as the home, the clinic, shop and zoo. That is, it must take into consideration the children's needs, interest and ability. Play involves learning by doing, using more than one of the senses in the process of acquiring knowledge as advocated by Dewey (2012).

Piaget also believed play as the basic, made for young children's thinking. He defines play as assimilation in which reality is assimilated to the child's existing scheme or view of the world, (Tassoni & Beith 2005). Play as assimilation means that children can try on a variety of roles and use play materials to represent real life such as building a tower to the moon. In ECD, assimilation occurs when children become selective and refines what he/she knows. For instance, distinguishing, matching and grading colours as red, blue or yellow (Morrison, 2000).

Piaget is also of the view that children use first-hand experiences and prior experiences in order to learn, (Bruce & Meggit 2005). Experience constitutes the raw materials which children use to develop mental structures. In ECD this is seen when children are involved in play activities where they apply skills or knowledge already learnt to solve problems. For example, a child who already knows that in order to build a tower which stands well, one has to assemble blocks which fit well to avoid the tower from falling. When that child tries to build towers he/she will use that prior experience.

Additionally, parents perceive as their duty to escort ECD learners to and from school. Bronwyn, (1998) asserts that parents-school communication includes information sent home with children while dropping and picking children. Steiner's belief in reincarnation has made ECD teachers aware that during the first seven years' children behave like a newcomer finding his/her way and therefore need protection which is usually guaranteed by parents. In support Bruce and Meggit, (2005) suggest that children need protection from adults such as parents so as to reduce their fears of the unknown. The idea of a carefully planned environment also emanated from their Steiner's theory. In ECD a carefully planned environment is seen, for example, when teachers plan and organise the learning environment. The play areas are organised to match the theme of the week. On the time table for daily routines, resting time for children is given a place after snack time, which normally constitutes various types of food they bring from their homes and prepared by their parents.

Steiner in Bruce et al, (2010) asserts that children need proper rest and proper diet, thus influencing the idea of planned meals. As per Steiner, what children eat is very important (Morrison 2001). As indicated by Steiner, the golden rule for the teacher is never to go against the temperament of the child, but to go with it, Bruce & Meggit, (2005). Also the idea of involving the community in ECD activities also emanated from Steiner (Minnet, 2010). Steiner like Froebel believed in the importance of the community. This gives impetus to incorporation of parents as it is rooted in the child's community.

MacMillan's (1860 - 1931) theory is based on the idea that first-hand experience and active learning through free play with access to a wide variety of materials supports children's learning, (Tassoni & Hucker 2005). She also placed value on good health in terms of diet, housing and physical condition as essential to effective learning which are also important issues even in the traditional society. All these provisions are made by the parents. She also

emphasised relationships and feelings, believed in very close partnerships with parents and the development of manual dexterity exercises, (Bruce et al, 2010). Therefore, parents must provide food which is balanced when packing children's lunch boxes. The Government's feeding programme came as a relief in the provision of food to ECD learners. However, the government only provides mealie- meal without relish still leaving responsibility for its provision to parents. MacMillan's belief that first-hand experience and active learning are of paramount importance is seen in ECD when children explore in their environment manipulating different materials. The idea of exploring the natural environment can be equated with play in the traditional Zimbabwean society which was not restricted with physical boundaries as the children went into the natural environments like bushes playing and learning at the same time with parents.

In ECD parents see themselves as the providers of basic needs such as books and clothes to those who afford, in contrary some view it as the Government's duty as stated by the ECD policy. (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald & Squires, 2012) share the same sentiment that the policies also take into consideration that parents require information and social materials and financial support from the government and any other funding agencies. Though currently, the government is failing to fulfil the policy maybe due to the instability of the Zimbabwean economy. Macmillan also placed value on the importance of good nutrition. She believed that children cannot learn well if they are under nourished or sick, (Seefeldt & Wasik 2002). In ECD, this is seen when teachers plan children's meals and encourage parents to immunise children against the childhood killer diseases. Due to ignorance some parents view it as a waste of time and some due to religion beliefs they consider it as a taboo. Research in Japan indicated that parents selfishly neglect their children's schooling and development whilst indulging themselves in their hedonistic desire for leisure or employment, (Halloway, Yamamoto, Suzuki and Mnohich, 2008 in Shizha, 2013).

Zellman & Perlman (2006) revealed that constant communication between parents and teachers was associated with more sensitive teacher-child, parent-teacher, and parent-child interaction. Isaacs' theory also influenced record keeping in E.C.D. (Bruce et al, 2010). She further says that Isaacs kept careful record of children, both for the period children spent in school and outside the school. Records such as developmental checklists anecdotal record and social records are being kept in ECD by the teachers as it enhances the relationship between both. Parents act as the central adults in a child's life; records are kept and are seen as central to learning

2.4 Benefits of ECD Programmes.

A good ECD programme has various benefits to stakeholders such as children and parents. The programme has the following benefits: parents feel welcome and involved; high standards of hygiene, happy and relaxed atmosphere for children, activities are child centred, interesting and appropriate activities, children are seen as special and life-skills are taught through routines (Tassoni & Beith 2005).

2.5 Parents feel welcomed and involved.

Since ECD programme deals with the tender ages where children are closely attached to their parents, it is of paramount important for them to be involved in the ECD programmes. Teaching and learning become meaningful, hence, making a smooth transition from home to school. Morrison (2000) was of the opinion that the union of the family and the school in the matter of educational aims enhances young children's learning. Consistently, Follari (2011) posited that a high-quality ECD programme involves parents in the learning of their children.

The combination of parents and teachers help to create a good atmosphere that promotes happy learning environments to children. The mother usually resembles the teacher by nature where both parents and teacher seems to offer the same duties that are likely to be performed at home and school. Their roles are interchangeable depending on the environment.

A good ECD programme should consider children's needs and interests (UNCRC, 1989, African Charter on the rights of children, 1990). Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) are the cornerstone of ECD teaching and learning (NAYEC, 2007). Teaching methods and the materials should be adapted to suit children's needs and interests. Parents as key stakeholders have a role to play in the provision of such materials and where possible acting as advisors through ECD teachers. Treating each child as an individual is part of what makes that child a unique person (Bruce & Meggitt, 2005). Parents should perceive their children as not alike in terms of physical, emotional, social and intellectual; hence their individuality must be respected and helps to support each individual child's development pathway.

Research has indicated that if a positive classroom atmosphere is created, children learn better and engage more effectively and powerful tools teachers can use to encourage children's learning (Minnet, 2010). Parents like to hear about what their kids are doing and how they perform different tasks. Zafeirakou (2012), asserts that an ECD programme requires personnel that have the requisite knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to design, implement, monitor, assess, and develop activities appropriate to the age groups from birth to eight years old.

Hygiene is the state of being clean. A good ECD centre should have adequate water and sanitation facilities so as to curb the spread of diseases (Statutory instrument of 106 of 2005). Clean and running water is also a key to upholding good hygiene standards. The Schools are expected to have running water and child sized toilets (Gunhu, Mugweni & Dhlo, 2011). Santrock (2005) stated that every child should have sufficient provision of nutrition and safe drinking water. Consistent with the idea is the opinion by Gunhu et al. (2011) that every child in ECD settings has the right to clean WASH.

Child-centred activities places the child first, this is an approach that values all children's rights for education that helps them to grow to their fullest. As parents become more concerned about every aspect of their children's life it is very important for the teacher to increase the child centred approach teaching methods.

It is against this foundation that the study tried to investigate the parents' perceptions of the ECD programme.

5.METHODOLOGY

In this study qualitative interpretive research paradigm has been adopted. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2010) sees qualitative research as data analysis that involves organising, accounting for and explaining the data, in short making sense of data in terms of participant's definition of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities. The paradigm was chosen because it provides participants the opportunity to impute meaning to a particular problem. The research design adopted was a case study. In this case, data were collected using semi-structured interviews. In this study, a subset of ten parents in one school was selected out of the entire population of parents with children attending ECD in Mutare District. The sample consisted of five male and five female. The participants' ages range from eighteen to forty since they are the child bearing age and they have children in ECD classes.

6. FINDINGS

In this section, we draw on the analysis of interviews to present findings in response to the research question. Presentation and analysis of findings on the parents' perceptions of the ECD programme were made. The analysis was made in relation to the literature presented in chapter 2 and the Ecological systems theory's lenses. Phrases and words were used to present the data collected through interviews. Data was presented in themes. The findings were addressing research question 1 which reads; what do parents' value in the ECD programme? Research question 2 unfolds the challenges encountered by parents in the ECD programme and the last research question was on the strategies that can be adopted to enhance the ECD programme. Three priority themes that answer the research questions in their respective order have been adopted for data presentation. These themes are:

1. What parents value in the ECD programme?
2. Challenges encountered by parents in the ECD programme
3. Intervention Strategies that can be adopted to enhance the ECD programme.

Theme 1 is further categorised into the following subthemes:

- Parents' perceptions of ECD programme.
- Benefits of ECD programme to learners.
- Roles of parents in ECD programme.

Statements were quoted as they are given by the respondents and we translated statement from Shona to English.

What parents value in the ECD programme

From the study, it emerged that parents have various things they value about the ECD programme. These certain values they attach to the ECD programme determine their perceptions. These perceptions are explored below.

General parents' perceptions of the ECD programme.

Most parents understand ECD as a programme which was introduced by the government and views it as an important programme as it introduces their children to other children and support each other in their transition as they interact into their own friendship groups. The main purpose of linking Early Childhood Development and education and primary education is to ensure that there is a smooth transition for children from one level of learning to another (UNESCO, 1996a). The parents had varied perceptions of the ECD programme. These perceptions were grouped in three categories which are:

- Positive perception
- Negative perception
- Undecided

Name of participant	Positive Perception	Negative perception	Undecided
Parent 1	X		
Parent 2			X
Parent 3	X		

Parent 4	X		
Parent 5		X	
Parent 6	X		
Parent 7			X
Parent 8		X	
Parent 9	X		
Parent 10		X	
Total	5	3	2

Table 6.1: Parents` perceptions about the ECD programme.

Reasonably positive perception

The research findings show that most parents understand the ECD programme as a programme that lays the foundation of learners at an early age. The learners are enrolled in school as early as three years. The early intervention encourages holistic development, early detection of health problems, social, financial and emotional problems, provision of good nutrition and adequate resources. This notion has been substantiated by a number of parents who were involved in the interviews. Parent1 supports the notion that ECD programme leads to early detection saying,

I'm so impressed by this ECD programme, my child had a speech defect from birth but the problem improved by the time he entered ECD A through constant interaction with others. The teacher identified the problem and recommended her for speech therapy.

The idea was supported by Parent 3 who said, *ECD programme assists in detecting children`s problems as they interact with experts at an early stage.*

Parent 4 said, *Tinofara chose nekuuya kwe ECD nekuti inoita kuti vana vangware* [meaning we are happy with ECD programme because it makes children clever].

Parent 9 said,

The government is doing a good thing some of the teaching materials and food are being provided, as this is currently happening in schools where the government is offering feeding to ECD learners. Thus, the programme is holistic in nature.

Parent 6 said,

If my child fails to attend ECD, she/he won't be accepted at the formal school for grade one. The child won't be enrolled despite his age what matters most is whether the child has attended ECD A and B or not.

Parent 3 added her voice saying,

I am very impressed by the extension of the number of years in primary level the longer they stay in the primary education the more children understand better, hence yield better results.

Parent 1 said,

The ECD programme came as a relief as I cannot afford to pay a maid who can help me to look after my children and it becomes very affordable given my present salary which is currently below the poverty datum line.

Parents understand ECD programme as a mandate for every child to go through the programme before entering into grade 1, following the government policy as extended the play education from 7 years ago to 9 years course programme.

Smith (2014) echoes, child development experts indicated that it is during these years that can develop linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional and regulatory skills that predict their later functioning in many domains. This is in support of Jacobson, (2007) who suggests that courage, integrity, critical thinking and responsibility are necessary for all children in order to be prepared for an unknown future. To be a citizen in a sustainable society requires the ability to recognize injustice, when human rights are violated, and the need of care. One way to deal with this might be to try to identify what all children may benefit from in the future.

From the parents` assertions it shows that they have a positive regard for ECD for it assists them in minimizing risk on development through early detection and intervention. The dimension added by the parents is that ECD is a good programme and they view it positively as it makes children to be clever and alert at a tender age as early as three years resulting in good results in the end.

Some parents understand ECD programme as an aid which helps working parents to place their children whilst doing their daily chores without disturbances. This resulted in parents having enough time to perform their daily activities hence, yielding better results. Again it helps parents in the job market they find a safe place to leave their children without having a maid that they view as a waste of resources since the ECD offer better programme that benefit their children holistically that a maid cannot achieve.

Other parents understand it as a programme that encourages holistic development in learners at their earliest stages, that is, the ECD programme approach takes into consideration to build strong foundation for every child`s social, emotional, physical and mental development, hence this prepares them for a lifetime.

Negative perception

From the study it emerged that some parents have a negative perception about the ECD programme the respondents shared the following sentiments:

Parent 5

I`m not supposed to pay school fees for these learners since the government is forcing us on a condition of not enrolling our learners for grade one. In the past these learners were given free education and free food, this should continue, since the primary education has been extended to nine years. It is now expensive for us as parents, since we have other children in upper grades and some are at secondary level”.

Parent 8 said,

I want my child to be a fluent speaker, so how he/she is going to gain speaking skills whilst they are being taught in our mother language

Parent 10 asserted,

I cannot afford to pay fees for an ECD child as I am battling to feed the family as the cost of living is getting tough in almost every day. Again the government tried to curb our children's hunger by providing 'sadza' in school but our children are being chased away from school for unpaid school fees.

Parent 2 said,

Sometimes I see it not necessary to send my child to school every day as I need her assistance whilst I'm doing the household chores.

Parent 5 is not comfortable to pay fees for ECD learners as he views it as the duty of the government and donors. As supported by parent ten who shared the same sentiments in facing the same challenges in fees payment. From these responses, we concluded that some parents are giving ECD programme less value as important as upper grades or secondary education level let alone forgetting that it is the backbone of the whole education system. This is supported by (Peters, 2010), parents to provide social resources which includes parental skills, education, cultural practices and opportunities, family relationships and the health status of family members' economic resources.

This perception can be caused by their socio- economic background. Parents view the ECD programme as a donor funded where children are supposed to receive free education service and free feeding sessions, like in the past, parents had less input in the education of ECD learners their main duty was of releasing the child to a nearby preschool centre or feeding points as witnessed by the respondents.

As parents give less value in their children's learning, ECD learners can be tasked to look after other siblings whilst mothers doing their household chores. One respondent has witnessed a relative who moves around visiting relatives together with the ECD child.

Undecided perception

The study concluded that few parents have undecided perceptions of ECD programme this is preceded by the parents' response. Parent 2 alluded,

I always did as per government' policy as in the past children were just required to stay one year in ECD then move to grade one but nowadays we were told it's now a two year programme. Why they changed it we don't know

The point was corroborated by parent 7, who said,

I don't have to argue against government programmes so I just accept what is on offer. Whether it is good or bad, we are yet to see. Let's give it a chance.

Basing on the above sentiments the study showed that parents don't have their standing point, they just act according to government policy. Parents are not well informed about the ECD programme as they cannot tell whether it's good or bad. The parents may also be trying to be elusive in their responses, maybe, for reasons best known to them. The responses from the parents show that they are sympathetic to the government, for that reasons, they chose to toe the line and play safe.

Benefits of ECD programme.

From the study, it emerged that parents view the ECD programme as having a number of benefits such as good child care practices that offer security and safety to children, early stimulation and early detection of developmental problems such as disabilities.

Early detection

ECD programmes helps parents to discover the ability gaps and disabilities in their children at an early age. ECD programme has the potential to reduce these ability gaps by quick interventions. Most of the parents perceive the programme as it gives much benefits to their learners since the programme promote early detection of health problems. This point was confirmed by Parent 5 who said,

My child had an eye cataract for four years unnoticed until the child enters ECD and that is when the problem was identified. An operation was contacted thereafter.

The idea was seconded by Parent 3 who said,

my child had a speech defect which was rectified through constant interaction and now is able to speak well as compared before coming to ECD now she become very talkative. At church she can recite some memory verses confidently.

Parent 9 of the Johanne Marange had the same sentiments with the above participants as she alluded,

The ECD programme gave our children the opportunity of getting immunized as the health card is a requirement for learner to be enrolled in ECD. Again the educative lessons we receive enlighten us as a church and at the same time improves our children' health.

From the parents' contributions it shows that parents have faith in ECD programme as they see it benefiting in improving the health conditions of learners at early stages. The expertise in ECD educators helps them to identify areas where support is needed for each child and around these; learners will quickly identify the importance of peers in this regard as ECD learners are usually helpful and co-operative.

ECD programme give learners the opportunity of getting immediate attention when they fell ill, they are quickly ferried to the nearest clinic before the arrival of the parents. The programme facilitates the health services which should made available to orphans and other vulnerable children who may have problems in accessing health care, usually got the assistance through the invitation of health personnel who visited the schools to provide health interventions such as immunizations and vitamin A supplements.

ECD programmes open up an opportunity to improve the quality life of learners in terms of their well-being. The detection, treatment, correction, improvement and prevention of nutritional, health, physical or mental defects and the early removal of learning difficulties is also catered for in ECD programme. As eluded by other participants of the Johanne Marange that learners get chances of getting immunised as their religion regard it as a taboo, thus improving the health status of an ECD learner.

ECD benefit learners as the programme improves equality through inclusivity where learners with different learning styles and gender differences are made to learn under one roof despite their differences. ECD intervention seem to benefit the poorest and most disadvantaged

children as they have access to education at a low cost to promote children's success in school and life

These sentiments echoed by the parents reinforce the UNDP (2004), number one which seeks to reduce poverty by expanding ECD programmes. One of the most important things we have earned through it is that investing early is one of the best ways to lower the vulnerability of the poorest children, families, and communities. An ECD programme proves to improve a child's chances of survival and later success in life.

Early stimulation

ECD programme helps to groom future community leaders, educators, business leaders and customers, as the today's world requires high levels of none. Cognitive skills like the ability to adopt, solve problem, think critically, innovative and work in teams. These skills are highly gained when children undergo the ECD programme. Fallan (2011) says, differences in children's base line knowledge and skills are a primary cause for the achievement gaps beginning at an early age and cannot be mitigated by educational experiences after second grade. The teaching methods used in ECD helps learners to learn in a fun and exciting way that will encourage children to be effective learners, thus inspiring thirst for learning with eagerness and enthusiasm The skills can be enhanced through teaching methods such as role play, dramatization and group work. Classroom corners like shop area inculcate business leadership skills in learners. Parent 5 said,

I have seen ECD learners playing shop keeper, nurses, mothers, fathers' and pastors' role whilst others are congregating during their play time. The activities help our children to acquire different skills at a tender age.

Parent 8 concur with parent 5

My child enjoys reading during weekends, whilst playing with friends and recite rhymes in a fun way. Some of the activities are done spontaneously rushing after one another; hence, the activities seem to produce more effective outcomes.

Parent 2 said,

My yard has small holes all over where my child always plays around with her friends playing different games. The learned skills help my child to count, read and perform simple household chores such as putting utensils in order and collecting fire wood. The child will be playing what she has learnt at the ECD centre.

Parent 6 added:

Learners are being taught with ECD specialists thus putting our children at an advantage as these teachers knows exactly what, when and how to teach. Unlike in the past our children where just going for feeding sessions and nothing else.

. Parent 3 agreed on this point saying:

I noted a great improvement on my child as she relates with others even strangers. She also seems ready to proceed for grade one as she looks motivated to learn, taking her time to scribble every time she gets a pen paper or charcoal. She is also motivated to read anything in print form.

Parent 7 agree with the above statement by saying,

My child doesn't face any problems going away from me. She enjoys going to the ECD centre and exhibits a lot of energy when going away. She is just confident and independent.

From the assertion above, parents view ECD programme as it offers a suitable package of competencies to be achieved by children as they are taught by well qualified teachers. ECD programme improves auditory and pre-literacy skills as positive behavioural and attitudinal changes enhanced confidence and self-esteem awareness that learning is a normal activity throughout life pleasure from collaborative learning (Follari, 2011). As ECD learners play games like 'nhodo', 'pada', 'kodoro' and 'rakaraka' to mention a few, all these promote learners' pre-number and oral skills. Thus ECD results in low cost to the financiers of education. Research by UNESCO (1996a) indicates that there is improved preparation of children for primary education especially in the development of basic skills such as reading, writing, numeracy and language learning.

Parents view ECD programme as benefiting since the programme bridges the gap between ECD and grade one. ECD programme is seen as the preparatory stage where learners are equipped with all the necessary skills which qualify them for grade one entry. The continuation of events prepares learners for the next coming challenging activities; hence the base has been already created in ECD. After the experience of ECD programme and aspects of the home learning environment were found to have a significant impact on children's cognitive development both at age three years plus and again at school entry.

Parents have confirmed their children could enter grade one with positive attitudes towards classroom activities, as they are able to adapt to classroom procedures, learn and do the schoolwork. This is evidenced by the children's behaviour which exhibits a lot of confidence and independence. Tassoni & Beith (2010) assert that children who received quality ECD programmes are less likely to repeat grades or drop out of school which reduces the overall costs of the education system. The children's positive attitudes toward school are reinforced; they feel competent and their teachers identify them as competent and treat them as such (Later et al., 1982 cited in Halpern & Myers, 1985). It can be deduced therefore that learners' competence in primary as well as in later educational levels, is a result of attending ECD education. The learner's potentials may be seen in later life addressing the most critical skills gaps. The evidence presented shows that investments in quality ECD lead to more productive, skilled workforce and yield high returns in a continuous economy.

ECD programme helps to reduce repetition of grades when learners approach higher grades (Farran 2011). Concepts are taught incremental starting as early as ECD, hence stimulating and catching them young simplifies concepts and making them easy to grasp. The study can therefore, conclude that ECD programme was introduced to curb wastages in the education system and to the community at large. This finding replicates the study by Plan Bangladesh which found out that early stimulation and preparation for education enhance student learning in school and increases retention rates up to the terminal grades. There is also the reduced educational expenditure because of little or no need for remedial action for the slow learners since these are minimized through the ECD programmes (UNESCO, 1996a). For the children who don't attend ECD, there are personal and social behaviour problems in the form of poor adjustment, continued high primary school repetition and dropout rates (Halpern & Myers, 1985). Children are also provided with the opportunity to develop positive attitudes, self-confidence, motivation and ability to learn which are conducive to the child's development, happiness and success at school. ECD education also leads to the development of capable children who will eventually contribute to a society of educated, responsible and productive citizens (UNESCO, 1996b).

ECD programme provide learner with the opportunity to exercise their birth right of receiving education at their early ages, hence reduces lagging behind and remediation of learners in later grades. This was made viable to every child through the sustainable development goal, no matter whom they are or where they were born. ECD is also critical to achieving nearly all of the sustainable development goals including ensuring quality education, eradicating poverty, improving nutrition, protecting health, achieving gender equality, promoting decent work for all and fostering peaceful societies.

ECD programme if well met, it leads to better school readiness and academic achievement in learners and help develop necessary skills that are key to success both in school and in the work force, hence provide opportunities for marginalized and disadvantaged children to succeed. The programme by the virtue of being available to every learner despite one's geographical position, race, and background it gives room to learners get the necessary skills which leads to greater achievements. ECD programmes offer the highest returns and lay a strong foundation of cognitive ability and skills that will prepare them for success in school and life. Children who have positive start to school are well positioned to build a sense of belongings that promotes engagement in the educational environment (Dockett & Perry, 2017).

Good childcare

The study revealed that ECD programme provide good childcare practices which assist in children's development. These practices include provision of balanced diet to children and advocating for other good care practices like avoiding child abuse. Parent 7 admittedly said

I got married at sixteen years without the necessary skills on how to care for my child but with constant meetings with ECD professionals, there is a great improvement in my operation with children. I'm now fully equipped with good parental care skills such as providing my child with a balanced meal as this boost my child's health which act as a fuel to the development of the child.

Parent 8 added,

During my life time I never knew that I can provide balanced meals to my family from my garden until I engaged myself in school gardening activities where we planted different types of vegetables which includes leaf, legumes and root vegetables.

Parent 4 said,

I have seen my child coming home with a bright face well-polished in the company of his friends. I took this as a clear sign of good care and put my heart to rest as am rest assured that my child is in good hands.

Parent 2 agreed with the above participants by saying,

I can perform my household duties without disturbances when my child is at school and I find it pointless to have a maid as a helper since ECD programme has designed to provide maximum care as the maid does.

Parents have noted that ECD programme tend to free up time for mother or guardians of ECD children and this allow them to perform other economically productive activities. ECD programme creates or improves the employment opportunities of mothers hence they can earn an income (Yallow, Hamilton, & Walkin, 2012). The participants agreed that quality childcare in ECD improves production as they have enough time in doing their work and reduces absenteeism for working mothers. The idea child care in the ECD programme has been

influenced by the ideas of Margret Macmillan who opened an open air nursery for the children from poor families (Tassoni & Beith, 2005). Another influence came from Robert Owen who opened a preschool at Lanark for children of workers at the cotton mill. This necessitated the parents and other siblings to go for work leaving children at a safe place. ECD has taken the roles of parents in one way or the other as children spend most of their time at school while preparing for school and for life.

The ECD centre resources are mediated by access to societal resources that enable families to assist in the best interest of their children, including providing services such as caregiver support, quality childcare and health care and education which advances that children learn best when they are given adequate learning and development material (O'donnel, 2008). Children learn to share, cooperate, and persevere within a safe learning environment guided in the hands of professionals who have the children's interests at heart. The loco- parentice act build confidence in learners and entrusted their attachments to the teachers, this become very useful to the first born child who may not be used to sharing with their siblings at home.

The ECD programme aid in boosting confidence among parents as they leave their children under the care of teachers and the education system, leading to becoming more active partners with schools a greater understanding of child development and of the intervention strategies that can be used to help children to learn the key points in development, improved parenting better relationships with children. Parents view ECD provides an adequate parental care that will equip parents with the necessary skills to help children to grow in a health and welcoming environment that allows full growth of the learners.

Protection against abuse

ECD programme helps to address the society which is changing through the introduction of guidance and counselling at the earliest stage of ECD.

Parent 9 supported the above notion by saying,

I feel my child protected when she is at school considering the number of cases we hear on social media about children being abused by house maids.

This sentiment was supported by parent 4, who said,

I find the school environment safe, as we fear for our children to be victims of human slayers rooming around our area.

Parent 6 said,

Learners are less exposed to vulgar language as they are always guided by teachers and peers as they interact during the teaching and learning process. They learn good social skills. Parent 10 said,

I often heard ECD learners singing 'apa pangu' don't touch in streets or on their way coming back home.

Parent 7 concur with the suggested idea by saying,

I have witnessed my child running away and screaming loudly when a relative tried to play 'chiramu' around her.

Parents view ECD programme as it educates learners at a tender age on all forms of abuse which helps to minimize abuse cases, both at home and school for example sexual abuse being

taught as early as ECD stage. The educative lessons through guidance and counselling sessions help learners to sail through in the harsh environment full of abusers.

We also observed police officers visiting schools as well as ECD centre sensitizing learners on child abuse. It has been observed that learners are free to disclose any form of abuse to educators than to their parents, hence helps learners get quick attention. Most parents have tendencies of keeping secrets even things are not good, they usually want to maintain their relationships especially if the incident involves their relatives or immediate friends. Children are at risk of being bullied, physical and sexual abuses and accidents when they are left alone at home, if children left at school, they are less exposed to such threats, (Messher & Levy, 2012). Furthermore, Gudyanga, Mudihlwa & Wadesango (2014) noted that bullying behaviour remains persistent because the bullies operate usually in secret and they threaten to make things worse for victims who expose them to authorities. ECD programmes safe guard the children's rights by well educating communities.

Some view ECD programme as a safe environment for children rather than leaving children in the custody of housemaids given different allegations perpetuated against these housemaids. ECD programme minimize on cases of child abuse usually perpetuated by maids and other relatives who are left in the care of children.

The responses from the parents show that ECD programme provide a safe health environment through good child care practices. ECD programme provides considerable opportunities for protection against physical and sexual and emotional abuse, violence, and neglect. In the current study informants also said that in general children are at risk of being bullied and they can experience physical as well as sexual abuse when they are left at home and they did acknowledge that ECD are helpful because they offered protection to children against such threats. Yallow et al., (2012) also found that instead of being left alone in the home while their mothers or guardians go to work the children centres provided considerable opportunities for protection against violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect (Yallow, et al., 2012).

Gone are the days when aunts and uncles used to sit down guiding and counselling children as they grow, like in the past as alluded by the Yoruba proverb which says "it takes a village to raise a child". This proverb has now some limitations due to the changing of society as every parent now wants to be in working places leaving less attention their own children as they used to do in the past. So ECD programme has taken this task by offering guidance and counselling lessons and to parents it becomes an opportunity as it balances both the working and guidance of children.

Health benefits

The link between the health and nutrition of learners through the provision of nutritional garden, feeding programme and monitoring of growth and mother toddler sessions renders the assurance of good health to learners. Parent 7 said that,

We as parents we are rest assured that our children are having enough and nutritious meals through the feeding programme. Through the ECD programme we are guaranteed that our children are getting enough food, we are no longer affording to buy some of the food considering the high inflated products and the dry spelt seasons.

Parent 8 supported the above point by saying,

I enjoy coming to work in the nutrition garden because I see it benefiting to our children' health as they come home with full stomachs.

Parent 10 echoed,

I have seen much difference in enrolments in ECD centres those who provide food tend to have more learners as compared to those who do not offer feeding facilities. Parents seem to favour centres with feeding provisions

To confirm the view, Parent 6 said,

I have enjoyed being part of the team that constructed the ECD play area because I have also gained some skills that I can use to get in business and earn a living.

In the developing world 200 million children under the age of five are currently prevented from reaching their full development potentials by poverty, insufficient nutrition and health service, and inadequate cognitive stimulation. The provision of meals ensures that children have at least a meal a day which contributes to fighting malnutrition. The provision of these meals is also a major attraction for children. (Barnett & Frede, 2010). All these activities provide a secure and stimulating environment for the ECD child, hence early opportunity which adds up to the best possible start in life. Good health environments allow children to grow, learn and even to their full potential.

The finding also shows that life at the ECD centre can also be extended to benefit the home. This confirms the ecological systems theory that advances the view that institutions in a system influence each other and those that are close to each other influence each other more. During, it emerged that, parents perceive themselves as gaining life skills at their early ages through ECD programme skills on nutritional garden, play centre construction and doll making. The skills imparted help them to have their nutritional gardens at home hence improving their way of life. As learners learn by imitation, ECD learners will quickly follow suit by engaging themselves in different tasks hence makes learning enjoyable and interesting.

Roles of parents to ECD programmes

The study established that there is a close relationship between the ECD centres and the parents. Parents took various roles in the ECD programme such as involvement in food preparation during the feeding programme, providing learning materials such as books and crayons for their children and payment of levies and assisting children in homework.

Provision of teaching learning materials

Parents support the effectiveness of the ECD programme through strong relationship which exists between school and home providing teaching and learning materials for the children. To confirm the view, parent 1 said,

Considering the ages of our ECD children I see it very important for me to have good communication relationship with the school so that when the school needs our help will be available to give a hand. I provide books, crayons and other resources called for by the school for my child.

Parent 2 asserted,

I volunteered to offer support in preparing food for ECD learners in support of the Government's feeding programme which is bringing in grain to the school and as parents in return we are coming in groups to prepare food for our children.

Parent 4 further explained,

school resources cannot be enough for every learner so I feel that I have the responsibility of providing my child with all the necessarily materials that help to facilitate the teaching and learning process but this time around I am failing to provide due to the ever raising prices.

Parent 3 added her voice saying,

In my area, there are so many ECD centres and with the knowledge I gained through parental involvement now am earning a living by constructing ECD play centres as most of the parents are working at different places where they have limited time to of help to the centres.

Parents' responses showed that they understand themselves as the agencies of education through the provision of learning materials to their children. They see this as their role though with challenges where others due to financial constraints fail to provide as expected. When the government launched the feeding programme as parents we were well informed it as a joined venture were parents are supposed to put hands up in the supply of relish to facilitate the programme.

Provision of social resources

It also emerged during the study that parents provide social resources which include parenting skills and education cultural practices and approaches, interfamily relationships and the health status of family members, economic resources including wealth, occupational status and dwelling condition. To corroborate this finding, Parent 7 said,

I have always been available providing any information about my child needed by the teachers. I have seen this working well because they have known the best way to handle him.

Parent 3 added,

We have a very good working relation with teachers at the school. They sometimes invite me to tell their children 'ngano' [folk stories] or teach them some cultural songs and games.

. Parent 3 said,

The ECD programme has come as a relief to both parents and children from poor backgrounds. We grew up knowing that ECD is for the rich, and the whites.

Parent 9 confirm the early help given through the programme by saying,

I come from a poor family but I'm happy my child has been enrolled in ECD under a donor funded scheme the school fees are paid in time.

Thus, some of the roles played by parents at the ECD centre are to work as resource persons providing the needed knowledge and skills from their community. The competences and skills fostered through ECD programme are not to cognitive gains, but also include physical, societal and emotional gains all of which are determinants the life course. This finding resonates well with the ecological systems theory that advances that the community which is part of the microsystem has a strong influence on the ECD centre (Fieldman 2009). Lien (2008) asserts that sound parent-child relationships contribute positively to a child's learning and development.

Parents provide a sense of belonging to ECD learners that sense plays an important role in the development of children's awareness of their identity and feeling of belonging hence helps to shape their responsibility to it. As learning and development takes place in a social context, Children's ever-evolving living occurs not just in the school but also in community and society. Urie Bronfenbrenner highlighted this in his ecological system theory, which reminds us that the child doesn't exist alone, that there are a number of interdependent relationships and networks that support the growing child (Kelly, 2010)

Holding consultation, prize giving days' help create one on one interaction between parents and teachers. Consulting with children helps parents to be aware from the outset what their children do and why they do it. The practices help parents to be part of the learnt curriculum and they own most of the activities as their contributions are recognized through them being involved in most school functions. Hearing that their children are being active in the school is an important message for them, because it is only with their support that their children do the best.

Enrolling children in the ECD centre

It also emerged in that study that one of the parents' role is to send their children to the ECD centre. To confirm the view, Parent 6 asserted,

Having my first born enrolled at ECD was my dream as a parent. Enrolling my child at the ECD centre was my first step to development that shows my child is growing up.

Parent 7 shared the same point,

It is my responsibility to send my child to ECD as enunciated by the government. All maintaining good relations with the school are another.

Parent 8 had a slightly different angle but still confirming what his predecessors said. He said,

Enrolling ECD child it's the duty of the mother, I can't spare my time waiting in a queue and I find it disturbing.

The finding is confirmed by Lien (2008) who advances that some parents believe that getting the child to school is their outmost role.

The view parents as resource persons on community knowledge or expertise to enable children to learn experiences that is meaningful and relevant to their lives in order to understand and respond to children's needs, ECD need to be drawn and interact with the environment in which children live and grow, thus reflecting the reality of children's lives. Parents may also act as role model by cleaning even their local environment to uncalculated the spirit of cleanliness into their children. The teaching of Maths and Science will be much easier on the topic of hygiene, as learners have already done this previously at home. If parents act as good role models, learners would not face challenges because parents had already introduced some of these concepts at home unknowingly.

Helping children with homework

During the study, it emerged that parents help to facilitate learning programmes through helping learners in homework, holiday work and gathering teaching aids. All respondents admitted that they are the ones responsible for assisting their children with homework. Parent 1 said,

I find it difficult to help my child in homework; I did not stay long in school I went as far as grade seven.

However, upon further probing, the parent revealed,

Though I try to assist my child, at times my knowledge is limited and I cannot effectively assist. In addition, I am not financially stable that I fail to provide for the learning materials needed.

Parent 2 added,

I work in the construction industry so most of the time I come home tired but I try to assist my child in homework.

Parent 3 explained,

I work very closely with my child helping in homework. If you don't assist the child with homework, you may not see the progress your child is making. I really commit myself to assisting in homework.

Parent 9 further elaborated,

I often send my child to my rural home and my mother is too old to help in holiday work. I make sure that before she goes for the holiday or immediately before schools open, I assist her with her holiday homework and also prepare learning materials needed for the new term.

Parent 10 also said,

Assisting my child with homework is my number one priority. I want to see my child successful in life so I have to give all that I can.

The parents' view on homework is confirmed by Fisher, (2008) who points out that the purpose of homework is to foster personal development like taking responsibilities to have self-confidence to manage time and to develop planning skills. Some learners experienced homework as more pleasing when their parents were involved while others felt that conflict with parents would arise over homework.

In addition, some parents' worry on lack of materials to use during homework confirms the findings of Barnett et al (2012) research which demonstrated that there is a significant and positive relationship between availability of reading material at home and the child's achievement in reading.

Assisting children with homework is one example of a good parenting in as much it is a role. Good parenting practices suggest that parents should ensure quality time with their children for psycho/emotional balance (Evans, 2006). It is important to note that children who are given support in homework flourish linguistically, cognitively, emotionally, socially and morally (Grover, 2005). Thus, from the study, it is evident enough that parents are alive to the need for their children to achieve highly in all the domains.

Parents are essential because they provide the resources that their children need, but these resources are drawn from a larger environment that mitigate the expenses of raising children, such as the labour market and the government. Parents are seen as primary players and children are viewed as passive recipients of the resources and opportunities that others provide for them (Calarco, 2011).

4.3 Challenges experienced in ECD

The study showed that most parents have a number of challenges with the ECD programme such as lack of agency on parents, misconceptions on the play pedagogy, language use and payment of fees. The above cited challenges lead to parents' view ECD programme as bringing more problems to them as compared to the value it has for their children.

Misconceptions about play pedagogy

The study showed that some parents have misconceptions on play as a teaching and learning method. There is a misconception on play as a teaching method as they view it as a time waster that hinders children's learning. The parents do not see the educational value of play yet it is the central pedagogical practice in ECD. To confirm the misconception, Parent 1 said,

I have often pass through the ECD centres seeing them playing in the play centre and I wonder when do these learners are engaged in serious learning.

Parent 3, agreed with parent 1 by saying,

I often see children play at school and I really wonder why do we spend money for these learners if they are coming to school for play.

Misconceptions about language use

In the study, it emerged that parents have misconceptions on the use of English language in ECD classes 'A' and 'B'. Parents view ECD programme as the main source of language as they love their children to be taught in the second language which is English. Parent 2 and 8 concur on these views.

Parent 8 said

I once withdrew my child from a centre where they always use Shona and my child spends the whole year without speaking a single sentence of English.

Parent 2 stated,

English has been taken as the recognized language internationally so how are our children going to communicate with other people from different countries if they are taught in Shona. For me to know that my child is learning, she should be able to speak in English and able to read and write.

Parent 4 opted for the use of both languages for the child to be flexible when need arise.

I could prefer the use of both languages since we are now in a multi-cultural country for our learners' competence.

The findings showed that parents are not happy when children continue using mother language they always use at home. The study has shown that, a centre may lose learners if they fail to use English as a medium of instruction as according to parents' view they end up not enrolling or withdraw their learners from such centres. The mother language as a medium of instruction is viewed as outdated by parents as they prefer their children to be taught in English. Parents have a feeling that learners should be taught using English as a medium of instruction, since learners speak or use their mother language at home. Most of the parents view such mother language as an old way of teaching and they prefer to go to modern by using English. Research conducted by Gudyanga et al (2015) revealed that eight-six percent of parents preferred the use

of English as the medium of instruction in ECD, while sixty-six point seven percent of teachers preferred both English and Shona together.

Underfunding of the programme by government and high fees

The study revealed that parents view ECD programme as donor funded and expect everything to be done by the government. ECD orphans are facing problem in many ways as inadequate learning materials, lack parental care and love to mention a few. To confirm the sentiments, Parent 5 lamented:

We cannot pay fees for such young children to go and play. Government and donors should pay if they want those in school. The Cyclone Idai came to us a bullet leaving us homeless, all our belongings were washed away, including my granddaughter's school materials. [Shedding tears] she added, her mother passed on five years ago.

Parent 7 has the same comment,

My wife is always at home so I find it as wasting family resources by sending those little ones they should remain at home waiting for the appropriate time unless the government pays for the fees.

Parent 6 said,

I feel pained when I fail to provide learning materials to make my child learn without problem but am failing as a parent to make those resources available due to financial constraints.

Parent 4 shared the same feelings by saying,

My child is in ECD A and she has to walk 8kilometres every day I feel pained and suggest if we can have centres which are nearer us.

Parent 8 said,

I have witnessed one teacher attached to one hundred learners against the recommended which is at twenty learners per teacher.

Seconded by parent 1

My child's class has 98 learners and all these learners have one teacher, and I feel the government is doing injustice both to the learners and the teacher

Parent 10 complained,

Since the ECD programme started our children are still sheltered under sheds and some in small rooms but we are paying fees equivalent to those grades housed in better rooms.

Parent 4 has the same grievance by saying,

I often see ECD learners on shifts some in the classroom whilst some are playing in the play centre meaning to say the rooms are not adequate.

The results showed that parents are grumbling with the teacher pupil ratio as it becomes the major challenge since the government currently is failing to employ teachers but this doesn't stop parents to send their ECD learners to school. The situation is forcing ECD teachers to have big ratios under one roof and even become hazardous for the learners' health.

Lack of learning materials coupled with lack of expertise in teachers give pressure for prior to school services to implement a stronger academic curriculum and become more school-like pressure for families to prepare their children for school with specific experiences. It takes time and conscious effort to implement changes in the education system for example in the provision of infrastructure most ECD classroom where renovated storerooms made to accommodate learners but they don't meet the expectations of a standard classroom. Learners may be at health risk since the rooms are not well ventilated, too crowded which may result in physical injuries due to potholes on the floors. Learning materials are too expensive, the textbooks are to be used by one learner and they can't be used by one learner and they cannot be used for the next year since learners did the care still not available in the market, few bookshops with them end to infect the prices. Even the schools are incapacitated to run the ECD programme.

Schools are being provided with the grain for feeding programme but the problem is on the provision of relish, cooking pots and even water since it is being rationed and caused by load shedding as the water systems are powered by electricity. All these hinder the proper functioning of ECD programme in terms of hygiene, provision of balanced diet and the learners' morale.

Regardless of how much parents may want to be involved, parents may not have time, energy, or money to be fully involved in ECD programme. Morrison (2000) argues that schools must be funded adequately from the national fiscal when launching a new educational curriculum so as to ensure that it is sustainably implemented from the grassroots level which can then contributes to the national implementation goals.

No funding for ECD programme even the government fund doesn't consider the ECD child through BEAM which starts to assist learners from Grade 1 up to upper levels. Children born into low income families are more likely to be exposed by conditions that are adverse for development such as homelessness, crowding, slum living conditions or unsafe neighbourhoods' languages and cognitive development are strongly influenced by the richness of the domestic language environment.

It emerged other families had survived Cyclone Idai and had relocated to Mutare district, therefore failing to get help. Donors are more concerned to those who remained in the affected areas. However, some of the parents developed a donor funded syndrome where they expect the government to do everything for them.

Parents are much concerned with the distances being walked by some of the ECD learners, given the enrolment age which starts from three years. Learners who stay away from the school are finding it difficult to be at school in time, hence they are considered as late comers and they are likely to receive punishments. If these practices persist learners may resort to absentee, hiding in bushes waiting for dismissal time and later they may drop out of school.

Lack of agency on parents

This may be for a variety of reasons such as a low income family who is unable to provide extra educational resources, or a single mother who must work fulltime as the head of the household and then does not have the extra time to help her child with homework.

Parent 2 said,

Thus making it difficult even for the school to give the first help before calling the parent to escort the child to the clinic, such practices hinder the full implementation of the ECD programs.

Parent 1 seconded the above notion by saying,

Due to cultural differences I have often see some children withdrawing themselves from school activities such as music, percussion band and traditional dance where parent may associate these activities with evil works.

Parents 7 echoed that

I work on shifts from 6 am to 6 pm and there are no replacements and this force us to go for work because we don't want to lose their jobs. My major challenge is on school activities and meetings that are often held when the some of the parents are at work.

Parent 9 has the same view,

Being a security guard minimizes my chances of attending to school functions as I work during the night I always need resting time during the day.

Parent 10 echoed,

Enrolling a child in ECD is a tiresome experience since it requires a lot of movement in seeking a place and at the same time it consumes a lot of money as you want to buy new uniforms, paying school fees and some of the learning materials.

Parent 3 asserted that,

This programme tend to frustrate children in their earliest ages I see no difference with learners who don't pass through ECD because I have seen doctors, teachers who never attended ECD but they have done well in school.

Parent 7 said,

I m a vendor so I have to wake up at dawn and spend the whole day on the market selling my products and I can't manage to lose some minutes or so attending meeting as customers' needs my attention.

Parent 2 added,

My body was weakened by a disease which I can't divulge but I find it difficult to walk more than five kilometres especially in harsh weather conditions.

Parent 3 further supported,

I feel ashamed to attend meetings that I can't able to sponsor since am not employed so I could prefer those with the capacity of funding the school to be very active in school activities.

Research indicates that socioeconomic status is one of the major structural factors that can predict parenting practices and their children's' academic achievement (Sorin & Galloway 2005). Education matters greatly for an individual's life chances and, due to the strong impact family socioeconomic status has on children's education, the topic of socioeconomic disparity in educational outcomes is a topic of growing concern (Morrison 2000). The ever rising of inflation leaves parents with no option on ECD children who are been send to school without enough resources. Parents held little responsibility for their children beyond providing basic needs, such as food, clothing,

and shelter. Now, parents are depended upon for much more beyond providing simple basic needs, such as financial and emotional support. These changing ideas or symbols place more accountability and pressure on parents to accept more responsibility and become more proactive in raising their children.

Poor parental skills demotivate ECD learners that may lead to dropping out of school or never be at school especially those from They will drop out of school even if school fees are paid for them (Ministry of Women, Development, 2010). The establishment of ECD is making a significant contribution as it is contributing towards ensuring children, especially that orphans and other vulnerable children, have access to nutritious foods, health care and psycho-social support. Mitchell & Myles (2004) said the study reveal that cultural differences can bring about considerable communication problem if educators use their own cultural lenses whom interacting and communicating with heterogeneous group of parents. Parents are the ones who are well knowledgeable with the norms and values which are acceptable in their local community. Their participation on sharing is of great importance in order to maintain the acceptable valuables and behaviour. Some cultures don't value the importance of health, as a result the children from such cultures do not participate in health activities, hence becomes very difficult for the school to get rid of common diseases which can be easily preventable and curable such as measles, polio, for example children from the Marange circuit.

Some parent admitted their failure to pay school fees in time and this will compromise the smooth running of the ECD programme. Lack of financial support makes it difficult or not possible to achieve the goals of the curriculum. The curriculum' thrust is to bring out the totality wholeness of child. Working parents usually fail to attend school events such as parents meeting, consultations, and sporting activities due to busy schedules that would not allow them to force themselves to be present.

Some parents undervalue ECD and put less importance in its attainment, parents who fail to succeed in school or who had unpleasant experience might not be very co-operative in school activities and support which leads to learners' absenteeism, bully, dropping out from school and poor supply of resources. Some studies reveal that poor attendance and low attainment tends to occur with parental variables such as low socio-economic status, conflict neglect, a criminal record and illness, (Barnett & Frede 2010). This result in children with homework as parents will not be knowledgeable about what children learn at school and how to help them; these children are likely not to be unsuccessful (Kelly 2010). Moyo, Wadesango & Kurebwa (2012) also contend that parents sometimes do not participate in ECD programmes due to lack of knowledge. They need to be assisted to imbibe the spirit of commitment in unison with the educators.

7. DISCUSSION

From the findings it emerged that the parents had both negative and positive perceptions about the ECD programme. These perceptions influenced how they got involved in with their children. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977) perceives the family as one element of the microsystem within the ecological model that inhibit children readiness for kindergarten through parenting and connectedness of the eight home school relationship (Kelly, 2010). Thus, a positive perception that sees parents assisting their children with homework results in firmly grounding children in academic work. The ecological theory ideas bring with it the opportunities for parents to have an insight in their children's learning practices.

The Headstart approach taken by parents as they get involved in ECD programmes such as the feeding programme also impacts on the curriculum used by the ECD centre/ school. The type of curriculum in ECD utilises in its programming is a factor that matters parents, (Ransom,

2012). The ecological theory suggests that parents are part of the microsystem that influences the ECD curriculum, (Hyde & Kabiru, 2003). Parents want to know exactly what is included in the ECD curriculum such as content and quality of the programme. The ECD should be of good fit to the parents, where family values align with the programme standards, (Leckart, 2012). Ispa, Thornburg & Venter, (1998) reported that parents felt that activities that promote social, cognitive and motor development were important criteria for ECD programmes to include in their daily routines.

Intervention strategies of improving the ECD programme

Nevertheless, no matter how challenging it may be for parents, it may be necessary for parents to become more involved in order to solve educational problems with their children. With the aid of some Non-governmental organisation the ECD programme can be improved by sourcing financial support or learning materials from BEAM, Capernaum, FACT, Mwana trust and Nhaka foundation in a bid to help schools which are incapacitated. Parent 1 said,

Nhaka foundation has done us proud by donating a block and a garden for the ECD learners.

Parent 3 asserted the same view by saying,

My child was selected to be assisted by FACT on fees payment; life became too difficult since the death of my husband.

Parent 2 said,

We have started our cooking club at the school where we are preparing lunch for teachers since most of them commute from town on daily basis and this project is enabling us to pay school fees for our children.

Parent 6 has the same view by saying,

Brick moulding became my daily bread since the time I got retrenched from my formal job.

. Parent 8 supported the idea by saying,

If a larger number of parents managed to attend school meeting this will help in decision making and important points will be raised and they will aid in developing the school programme.

Parent 7 had the same view as she said,

School meetings are very important and one should not miss such events.

The study has shown that engaging parents in community income generating project such as piggery rabbit keeping, gardening etc, can yield better results in improving ECD programme.

Parents have got of a view for meetings to be held in the evening so as to increase the attendance of parents. This is in support of (Lien 2008) who said, school events could be considered with the parents' busy schedules, this needs to be taken care of by school head if all parents are to be brought on board

From the parents' contributions, it can be established that as parents meet during functions like consultation days, prize giving days, meetings and other parental involvement activities like feeding programmes or projects, they tend to benefit from them. Parents benefit in a number of ways such as acquiring knowledge of good child care practices. Bodrova & Leong (2015)

state that parents, from impoverish enrolment need to be empowered if they are to make meaningful contribution to the education of their children through adult education. They also develop their skills that will later benefit the ECD child, for example, the involvement in the nutritional garden assists them to have knowledge of providing a balanced diet to their children. Barnett & Frede (2010) revealed that to involve parents is to create opportunities to use the skills of all parents bearing in mind that even parents from lower educational levels have skills which can and must be used to support each other. Kelly (2010) postulates that parents need information to be partners in their children's education and this is beneficial to all parties.

8. CONCLUSION

The study conducted revealed that most of the parents have reasonably positive perceptions towards the ECD programme. Five parents out of ten gave the ECD programme more value as they view it as benefiting to their children. The early interaction of learners with professionals leads to early detection of different learning gaps and disabilities amongst learners. Parents confirmed learners diagnosed learning problem like poor sight and hearing problems so that solution could be sought soonest. It emerged from the study that parents perceive ECD as a benefiting programme as it promotes early stimulation in learners as they are now enrolled as early as three years. Learners get sensitised on different issues such as use of good language, informed on abuse issues and have strong socialisation skills that will help them to interact with others in the society. Ispa, Thornburg & Venter-Barkley (1998) reported that parents felt that activities that promote social, cognitive and motor development were important criteria for ECD to include in their daily routines.

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